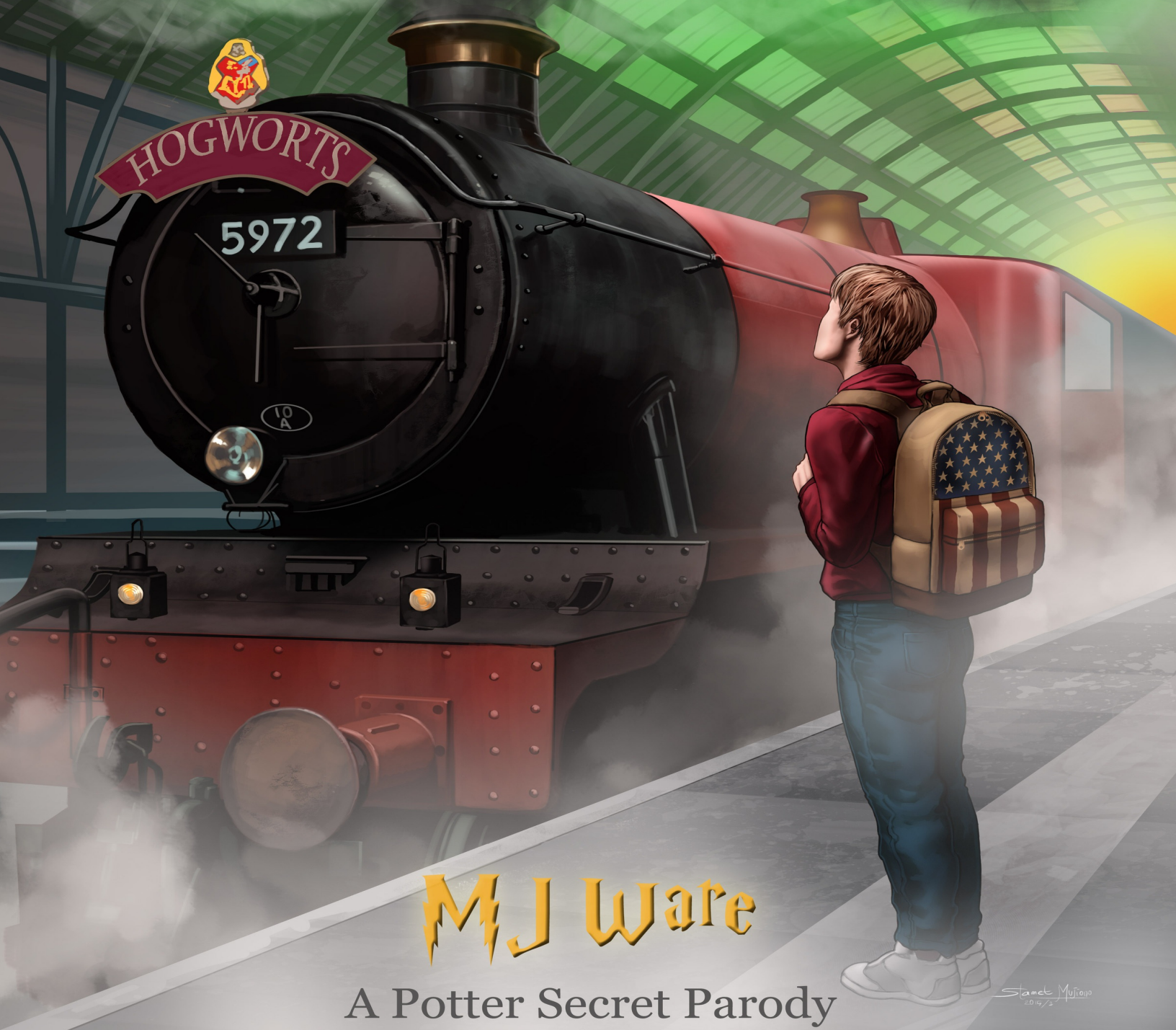


Harry Plotter

& the

Chamber of Serpents



MJ Ware

A Potter Secret Parody

Stamet Mufiso
© 2014/15

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Serpents

A Potter Parody

-Also Known As-

An American Muggle in Slytherin House

By MJ Ware

Cover by Slamit © 2015 by MJ Ware

DIGITAL EDITION v1.0a

This is a work of parody and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. So please make a copy for a friend.

* * * * *

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 – The Sorting Hat](#)
[Chapter 2 – Platform What?!](#)
[Chapter 3 – Professor Smape](#)
[Chapter 4 – Lost and Found](#)
[Chapter 5 – The Boy Who Lived](#)
[Chapter 6 – Stood Up](#)
[Chapter 7 – The Darkest Dungeon](#)
[Chapter 8 – The Wand](#)
[Chapter 9 – Quitlage or Die!](#)
[Chapter 10 – The Potter Posse](#)
[Chapter 11 – Bubbles and the Unbreakable Vow](#)
[Chapter 12 – Bubbles of Trouble](#)
[Chapter 13 – The Swelling Scandal](#)
[Chapter 14 – Dueling Dilemma](#)
[Chapter 15 – Secret Favors](#)
[Chapter 16 – Christmas Streaking](#)
[Chapter 17 – Tall Tails](#)
[Chapter 18 – It's the Pipes, Stupid](#)
[Chapter 19 – Dumblesnore Sours](#)
[Chapter 20 – Hermione's Danger](#)
[Chapter 21 – The House Cup](#)

[Super Zombie Juice Mega Bomb Preview](#)

[Dysgraphia Awareness](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

* * * * *

Chapter 1 – The Sorting Hat

High above, on the side of a cliff, stood the largest castle I'd ever seen—ever imagined. The windows glowed with candlelight, as the last desperate rays of light silhouetted the castle against a gray sky. I knew Britain was famous for old crumbly buildings, but this place was ridiculous.

One of the teachers announced, "First years, wait here. In a moment, we'll enter the Great Hall where you'll be sorted into houses."

As we waited to enter, all the talk seemed to be about was how much they didn't want to be in a house called Slipperen.

"What house are you hoping to be sorted into, Austin?" Colin asked me.

"Ummm." I looked at the age and general condition of the place. "One that doesn't leak."

"I'm going to be in Gryffinbore. I hope."

Gryffinbore, Slipperen, who thought up these names?

Inside, the hall was huge, and the ceiling looked as if it was open to the sky. Candles floated above the table. I swear I could almost see invisible strings holding them up. Though quite impressive, the effect screamed fire hazard.

We waited for our names to be called, then sat down on a stool in front of the entire school as a singing hat—that I figured had to be animatronic—told what house we were in. The other two houses had terrible names too: Ravenbeak and Huffalump. The kids from each house cheered whenever someone was put into their house. Slipperen had noticeably fewer students than the others.

The way everything was staged reminded me of this place my dad once took me to in Hollywood

called *The Magic Castle*. They had secret doors that opened when you said the magic words and all sorts of tricks and illusions everywhere. But it was tiny compared to Hogwarts.

I'd *never* heard of anything on this scale. Every teacher was completely costumed, and the magic, singing hat looked flawless.

Finally, my name was the last to be called. "Austin Winters."

I felt lightheaded as I walked up and sat on the stool. An old witch put the hat on my head, and it felt warm, as if it was alive. When it spoke, the sound echoed in my skull. "Slipperen!"

I passed out.

As my mind faded into unconsciousness, the last two days came flooding back.

I had woken up screaming, arms flailing, in an unfamiliar room. Sitting bolt upright, I wiped the sweat off my face using my satin sheets. I hadn't had that nightmare, the one with the snake, in a long time. Maybe it was jetlag.

The shade on the bedside lamp was bent. Something large and gray swooped over my head, and I ducked. "What the heck?"

An owl flew wildly around the room, bumping into the walls and furniture, scattering salt and pepper feathers in the air.

"Shoo, get out of here." I flapped my arms, herding it towards the window. "Out!"

Finding the open window, the bird soared out and past the face of Big Ben. I shut it. Why couldn't London have pigeons like a normal city?

Even though we'd flown business class, I hadn't slept much on the plane. The clock beside my bed pointed to noon, and my head felt like it'd been tossed around with my luggage. At least the rooms in the American embassy were nice—like belonged in a stuffy, rich guy's mansion nice. But they weren't comfortable and certainly not fun.

I tossed the T-shirt I'd slept in and noticed something on the floor: a small letter with a wax red circle stamped on it.

The letter had a seal like they used way back in super ancient times. Turning it over revealed the words, "Hogwarts School of Magic and Mystery." I had no idea what that was about.

I put on my jeans and stuffed the letter in my pocket.

After throwing some water in my hair, I wandered around the embassy for a while, trying to find Dad's office. I'd pinned my guest badge to my T-shirt, so no one seemed to mind a thirteen-year-old kid poking his head in every open door.

I would've asked for directions, but it was Dad's first day, and it wasn't like he was important or anything. He wasn't a real diplomat, so I doubted anyone could point me to his office. Finally, down on the main floor, from a far corner, came his voice. Dad's office was nicer than I'd expected. Maybe this really was his big chance for a promotion.

He sat on a sofa, across from a lady who poured tea—like I said, it was pretty posh. I'd never seen him drink tea. From the dull stuff they talked about, I figured she was his secretary.

I sat in Dad's overstuffed chair and put my feet on his desk. Bored, I pulled out the letter.

"Dear Prospective Student..." The words *prospective student* were written by a different hand than the rest. "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into the hallowed halls of Hogwarts..."

It went on about books and supplies, but I just skimmed over it until I got to the signature. It was huge and written with so many big loops and flourishes that all I could make out was "Headmaster." Most of the rest was illegible, at least to me. I'd never learned to read cursive well.

I could read some of the stuff under it: "Order of Merlin, First Class" and the name of the school again, "Hogwarts School of Magic and Mystery." What sort of messed-up name was that? And what type of magic were they teaching?

Learning real magic tricks would be awesome. When I was younger, I used to put on shows for the kids in my neighborhood. I even made up my own tricks and kept a quarter in my pocket so I could practice palming it. I only stopped when my friends said magic was for dorks. *Maybe magic's cool in England?* If that was the sort of stuff this school taught, I was in.

But what if it was that Wiccan stuff? Wasn't that for hippies and weirdoes? Wait, it was almost always females—*girls*—who liked that stuff. Sure, they were the all vegan, no-makeup type, but I could hardly afford to be picky.

Turned out my dad was thinking the same thing—not the cute Wiccan girls, but about school. "... and we'll have to figure out where to put Austin."

"There's a great private school just a couple miles away, called Aberdeen," his assistant said. "A lot of diplomats send their kids there."

"Sounds stupid." I made a paper airplane out of the embassy welcome letter on Dad's desk.

"They also offer boarding," she added.

"I imagine the tuition isn't cheap." My dad, the cheapest guy I knew.

"No, sir. I don't think so. Though I know there's a collection of uniforms left by past students in the embassy's laundry facilities."

"Hummm..." The gears tuning above Dad's head were practically visible.

Ugh, uniforms. I had to put a stop to this before it got any more traction. Quickly, I grabbed a pair of scissors off Dad's desk then cut off the top of my Hogwarts letter, the part with the logo and full name of the school, and also the bottom—just the part where it said all that weird stuff about Merlin and wizards.

"Dad, what about this school?" I held up the paper like I'd pulled it out of his mail pile.

"Huh, what's that?"

Dad's secretary—I mean, administrative assistant—came over and took it from me.

"Hogwarts," she read. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"Is it a good school?" Dad asked.

"I can't quite remember. I think so. Look at this paper. It's linen and handwritten—must be."

"Bet the tuition is an arm and a leg."

"It says here tuition is free. Maybe they want the prestige of a diplomat's son as a student." Her voice rose as she added, "Includes *room and board*."

"Really?" Dad could never pass up free.

"All he has to pay for is books and supplies. Oh, but the term starts tomorrow."

"Well, let's give them a call."

"There's no number." She turned the letter over, looking for contact info. "It just gives a time and

location at King's Cross Station."

"Fine, fine. Can you arrange to have a driver take him?"

"Yes. But I doubt they'll be happy if he shows up without his books." I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't notice that the books were all about magic.

"Maybe I can give him one of my credit cards with a note that he can use it for any school supplies."

"I don't think that's standard practice in England."

"School supplies only." He pointed at me. "You got that, buddy?"

"Yep, got it."

Chapter 2 – Platform What?!

The next morning, Dad gave me a hundred pounds spending money. That's close to two hundred bucks. He must've felt guilty sending me off on a moment's notice. He kissed and hugged me as I hurried to get in the car. The driver was young. He almost looked like a teenager.

"Have you been to King's Cross before, mate?" he asked with a heavy accent.

"No, never."

"Don't worry. It's easy to find your way around. Signs everywhere. Where's your train?"

"It says platform nine and seven-sixteenths."

"Yeah, right." He laughed. "Sorry, I can't take you in. I've got another pickup. If you have trouble, just ask a guard."

He helped me get my suitcases out of the car's boot (that's English-speak for trunk), and I stood alone, marveling at the huge building looming above me. The place was the size of an airport, but it looked old and kind of run-down—like everything in England.

Inside, a big electronic screen showed every train, its platform number, and whether it was on time or running late. But it showed nothing about the Hogwarts Direct or platform nine and seven-sixteenths. None of the platforms had fractions. I figured it was either a misprint—really platform

nine—or maybe it was off to the side of platform ten.

I headed to nine first: nothing.

As I passed the walkway between nine and ten, something insane caught my eye: a line of kids disappearing into the brick wall between the two platforms.

"Hey, is this the line for platform nine and seven-sixteenths?" I asked a girl carrying a large suitcase and a cat.

"Of course." She smiled.

"Shouldn't it be nine and a half?"

Her smile faded, and she stared at me.

Most of the kids wore either costumes or funky clothes—even by English standards. Some of the parents were dressed up too. "So, I guess they teach theater magic, not that Wiccan junk, huh?" I forced a smile.

She opened her mouth as if she was going to speak, but stopped and continued to look at me for a second like she'd never seen an American before. Then without a word, she turned back around.

"Friendly," I whispered.

I guessed Hogwarts must be famous—having a magic trick set up in the middle of a train station. Plus the fact that no one seemed to notice all the kids disappearing as they ran into a solid wall. It must happen all the time.

When my turn came, I tried to figure out the trick. It had to be mirrors—it's always mirrors.

Picking up my bags, I took a deep breath and ran. I didn't see any mirrors. The wall looked solid, and I slowed down as I approached, but just like everyone else, I went right through.

Behind me was a platform—a different platform—platform nine and seven-sixteenths. "Where're the mirrors?" I asked no one in particular.

"You, move, quick!" The girl who'd been in front of me pulled me out of the way, right as another kid appeared out of thin air.

"Wow, some trick."

"Has Hogwarts started a remedial program?" She walked away.

I was one of the last kids to board. Inside, the carriages were decked out with wood paneling and padded leather seats, way too nice for school kids. There wasn't any general seating. Everyone was in private cars, which made finding somewhere to sit a pain.

I came to a compartment with an open seat. Two guys a little older than me sat on one side. I opened the door and was about to step in when they looked up.

They were identical with flame-red hair, and their clothes, although not the same, were worn, patched, and faded. They both looked at me, and I knew I'd be asking for trouble if I dared join them.

Before I could ask if I could sit, a girl with a stack of books pushed past me from behind. "Pardon me." As she elbowed me out of the way, her huge mop of frizzy brown hair scratched my face like a Brillo pad. "Well, where are they?" she asked the twins, as if she had been terribly put out. I decided this wasn't the carriage for me.

I made it to the last carriage. The kids back there were the meanest, roughest I'd ever seen. I didn't know English kids could be tough. I turned back and resolved to sit in the first cabin with an open seat. I didn't care who was in it.

Three girls sat talking, all wearing robes with yellow trim. This school had weird uniforms. I recognized one of the girls as the one who'd been in line in front of me, the girl who already thought I was slow. I guessed I couldn't make her think any less of me.

"Do you mind?" I opened the door.

"Help yourself."

I tried to take up as little space as possible.

"Sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier," she said. "I'm Hannah Albot. This is Sharron Bones and Zoey Smith. She has a sister who's a first year too." The other girls smiled.

"Hi, I'm Austin, Austin Winters."

"You're American?" Sharron asked.

"Yep, my dad's a diplomat. Well, not a real diplomat. He's a member of the diplomatic corps."

"Wow, how cool," Hannah said. "I don't know if we've ever had an American at Hogwarts."

"I hope I fit in."

They smiled and didn't say anything else to me, but turned and started talking about who had broken up with whom over the summer.

By the time we got off the train, everyone had changed into robes except me. I still wore jeans and a Public Image T-shirt. I was so out of place.

Footsteps echoed on the worn wood beneath our feet. A few gas lamps cast shadows that danced amid the quiet crowd, as if revealing everyone's inner turbulence. The teachers, all in witch or wizard costumes, quietly directed students. It seemed everyone dressed up on the first day of term.

They separated us into groups by years. I guessed I was a first year—I didn't really know. Although some of the kids seemed small, they all had the same wide-eyed look of wonder that meant I fit in.

We followed an enormous, hairy guy down to a lake. He stood so tall, so big, I was sure he had to be standing on stilts. And he really got into his role. I'm not sure what he was pretending to be, but his beard had bits of food in it, and he smelled like bourbon and wet dog.

"First years, follow me." Only his accent was so thick, it was more like, "'Irst ears, 'ollow me." I could hardly make out any of what he was saying. Once we were at the lake's edge, I think he said, "Grab a torch and get in a boat."

Before we came to England, my dad had made me read this huge pamphlet for diplomats' families that had all sorts of information about surviving in England. It said that *torch* was the word they used for flashlight, so I was pretty stunned when he reached down (I mentioned his smell, right?) and handed me an actual torch, on fire and everything.

I got in the last boat with another kid who said his name was Colin. We sat silently and tried not to rock the boat. It was so small and so low to the water that any sudden move could tip it over.

Looking down at the water, black as oil, it occurred to me no one was rowing. The boat moved by itself. This was advanced magic. No mirrors here, I thought. Why would the school go to such effort to impress a bunch of first years anyway?

Chapter 3 – Professor Snape

I woke up to a sea of faces standing over me.

"I think he's coming around," said the particularly old, grizzled teacher who had put the hat on me and who I thought would look like a witch, even without the oversized hat.

A tall, dark teacher walked in. "Professor Snape, I think this boy needs some pumpkin juice," the witch said.

"Never mind the pumpkin juice," said an old lady, dressed up as a deranged nurse. "Here, drink this." She handed me a glass filled with a pale-green liquid.

The liquid went down thick and tasted like salted bug guts. I coughed it up, spitting it all over Snape's shoes.

"What the heck was in that?"

"Fermented slug tentacle with a dash of ground newt spleen."

"I think I'm going to be sick." I held my stomach, and Snape took several steps back.

"Everybody, give him some air," the wrinkled witch said. Once she realized I wasn't going to puke, she spoke. "I'm Professor McGonagall. What's your name, child?"

"Austin Winters," I said, slightly annoyed at being called a child.

"An American, no doubt."

I nodded.

"And why, pray tell," said Professor Snape, "aren't you wearing your robes?"

"Well, I just got to England yesterday, so I didn't have time to buy any supplies."

"You flew all the way from America to attend Hogwarts?" McGonagall asked.

"No, actually, I never even heard of the school before yesterday." I added, "It looks great. You guys really know how to put on some great magic tricks."

"Tricks?" snarled Snape. "Did he say tricks?"

"Oh, dear," added McGonagall.

"I highly suspect this boy is a Muggle." Drops of spit sprang from Snape's mouth as he spoke.

"And seeing as he has been sorted into Slytherin, it's my job—"

The door flew open with a crash. "To make sure he has the same opportunities as every other student," cried an old man dressed in the freakiest mad wizard's costume I'd ever seen.

One of the teachers mumbled, "Dumblesnore."

"Headmaster," Snape said, "this boy is a Muggle—"

"No, Sneverus." He patted Snape on the shoulder. "I highly doubt that. Each year, I send out several of Hogwarts's best owls to locate any gifted Muggle-born student we may have overlooked. They have never failed me."

"That's because they've never found anyone. Obviously—"

"Nonsense. We must at least give the boy a chance. It's only fair."

I thought about the letter. The owl hadn't actually given it to me. It might have just dropped it in its haste to avoid being de-feathered as I shooed it out of my room.

"He thinks they're magic *tricks*."

"He is in your house." The old wizard smiled. "I'll let you explain it to him. Perhaps Haggard can take him to Diagonally Alley for supplies. Until then, Finch can loan him robes and a wand from the lost and found."

"Brilliant," Snape said with obvious contempt. "Before this interruption, I was in the middle of dealing with another pair of delinquents. *You* wait here." He whispered something to McDonagall, and everyone left.

Chapter 4 – Lost and Found

A little while later, Snape returned, looking worse than before. He beckoned for me to follow him. "Hogwarts School of Magic and Mystery teaches real magic." Snape walked so fast I could barely keep up.

"You're joking, right? It's like the magician's code: the first rule of magic school is you can't talk about magic school?"

"No, it is real magic, as in the kind that can turn you into a toad, make your insides sprout, or kill

you with nary a word."

"Who says, *nary*?"

He stopped, and an ugly smile broke across his pale face. "I can see you are going to need a demonstration." He pointed his wand at my feet. "*Lepicorpus!*"

My feet flew into the air. I hung off the ground by my ankles. He moved his wand, and like a lopsided tetherball, I smashed into one wall, then the next.

"Understand?" he asked, his voice as cool as ever. "Real magic."

"Real magic," I muttered.

He flicked his wand, and as it disappeared under his robes, I fell to the dirty stone floor.

"Get up. I don't have all day."

Smape knocked before entering Finch's office. Bleak, gray walls huddled around a little cast-iron stove trying to keep warm. I couldn't figure out what Finch's costume was. Then it hit me—*they weren't costumes*. This was what these people actually wore. The slow realization that I was entering another world washed over me and made me lightheaded.

Although half his size, Finch smelled just as bad as Haggard, except he was more bourbon and menthol.

"Mr. Winters here needs a uniform and a wand from the lost and found."

"What house?"

Smape sighed. "Slipperen."

"Figures." Finch turned to a pile of dusty boxes on the floor below a polished set of chains and shackles along the back wall.

On his desk, sitting on top of a book called *Magic for the Magically Challenged*, lay a wand. He caught me glancing at it.

"Not that one." He grabbed the wand. "That one... err... that one was just turned in. Might be claimed." He put the wand, along with the book, in his desk drawer then tossed me a beat-up cardboard box. "Pick one of these."

Inside were about a dozen wands. I didn't know the first thing about wands, but most of these were

obviously old and discarded. One was bent. A couple had large cracks down the side. But there was one... one that caught my eye.

It was longer than the rest and skinny, with a series of small wood burls on it—almost like walnuts. I picked it up and felt tingling through my hand. I twirled it around in my fingers, and sparks flew out of its tip.

"How curious..." Smape eyed my wand. "How very curious."

"Are you sure you're a first year, boy?" Finch held a pair of really worn robes up to me.

"I guess so. I'm thirteen next month."

Smape huffed. "Dumblesnore. If it wasn't for Lily—" He stopped, almost as if he'd frightened himself. A second later, he said, "Well, you'll just have to make up the classes. Professor Luckhart can give you extra training in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and you can take two periods of Charms. You can drop Astronomy. It's almost as useless as Divination, and you'll probably have to do tutoring over the Christmas break as well."

"Sounds fun."

"You'll be lucky if you last the week."

Finch found a pair of robes that looked as though they'd fit. They weren't in bad shape, but they smelled like old cheese. He handed them to me, along with a green-striped tie.

"Oh, not a tie," I moaned.

Smape threw a worn-out pair of gloves at me. They were made of some leather I'd never seen before, but at least they matched. "Follow me. I'll take you to the Slipperen common room."

"Thanks," I said to Finch as I left, but he slammed the door as soon as I passed the threshold.

"I will assign a student to assist you tomorrow," Smape said. "After that, you are on your own."

We walked in silence, and I kept looking at the paintings. Some of them moved. I mean the people in the paintings were moving around, even talking, as if there were TVs behind them. We kept going downstairs until we got to somewhere that looked like a dungeon: dark, damp, and musty.

Smape put his hand on a well-worn stone in an otherwise plain wall. "The password is 'Plotter stinks.' Don't forget it." When he said, "Plotter stinks," the wall opened. Stone after stone crumbled to

powder. The dust disappeared in midair, revealing a large hidden room.

Inside, the room was dimly lit and irregularly shaped with plenty of secluded nooks. No windows opened to the outside, and the only real light came from a big fireplace along the far wall.

"Welcome to the Slipperen common room," Smape said. "This is where you'll spend most of your free time getting to know your fellow Slipperen students. Boys' dormitory is the hallway to your right, girls' to your left. Don't go down the girls' hallway. It's enchanted with a curse that will make all your body hair fall out and cause pus-filled boils to burst all over your skin."

"Seriously?"

Smape turned from me. "Flora, come here." It was late, and there were only a few kids in the room. They all looked up, and a girl hesitantly came forward. "This is Flora Carroll. Flora, you will help Mr. Winters find his way around the castle tomorrow. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly.

"Hi, I'm Austin." I looked back for Smape, but he was already gone.

"Don't mind him. Smape's not as bad as everyone makes him out to be. He's just sad, profoundly sad."

"Yeah, sad and psychotic."

"Are you the American boy, the one who fainted?"

"Why? Is there another American?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then yep, that's me."

"Don't worry about it. Everyone will forget soon, and even if they don't, they won't care. They already hate you because you're a Slipperen."

"Sounds lovely," I said. "Maybe the school should do one of those No Bully zones."

"I'll meet you down here tomorrow around eight?"

"Sure."

"I almost forgot to tell you. I have an identical twin sister, Hestia. She hates it when people mix us up, even though we normally dress the same, even when we aren't in our robes. I wouldn't talk to her

if I were you. She thinks Slipperen is only for purebloods."

"What's that? Like purebred dogs?"

"Umm, well, kinda. A pureblood is someone who doesn't have any Muggle blood."

"Muggle? That's nonmagic people, like me?"

"I wouldn't call yourself a Muggle. At least, not to anyone in Slipperen."

"Why not?"

"People are already talking. Everyone in our house is half blood or more. At least, that's what they claim."

"So that makes me even more of an outcast."

"Don't worry. They'll come around."

"See you tomorrow."

She smiled and went to the girls' dormitory.

I looked around the room. It was pretty dismal, with dark tapestries of wizards who looked as if they were planning the best way to kill you, statues, and carvings of skulls and snakes everywhere. Moss even grew in the cracks along the walls. A couple guys sat in a corner playing a game of cards, but they kept making small explosions like firecrackers. In another, a couple sat holding hands and kissing.

The room had only one window. It was huge and appeared to be blacked out.

Inside the boys' dormitory, I was surprised to find my suitcases at the foot of an empty bed. Most of the guys were awake, sitting in bed, talking in low voices or reading. A few of the beds had their green velvet curtains pulled shut.

I said, "What's up," to a few of the guys. All I got back were a couple of curt nods.

The beds were four-poster deals. A giant serpent wrapped around each post, and two more intertwined in the headboard. The place really went overboard with the snakes. I hate snakes.

Careful not to touch the wooden serpents, I pulled my curtains shut, and sitting on my bed, put on a clean T-shirt and tried to sleep.

Chapter 5 – The Boy Who Lived

My roommates woke me in the morning by jumping from bed to bed, casting spells at each other. When one scored a hit, the other kid would projectile vomit, or his face would droop like it was melting off, or something else just as horrible. I was eager to learn magic, but I wanted nothing to do with this.

To my surprise and slight alarm, I found my robes had not only been cleaned and pressed by some unknown person or persons, but a Slipperen badge and green lining had been sewn into them. Quickly getting dressed, I noticed a note on my dresser: a list of classes. A few were year-one classes, but most were second year. I was pleasantly surprised to see no English, science, or even math. Schedule in hand, I headed to the common room before a rogue spell could rearrange my face.

The common room was packed with nowhere to stand, let alone sit. The huge window that had looked blacked out at night now glowed with a dim, green light. It looked like a gigantic, algae-filled aquarium. Through the murky water, an occasional shadow dashed by. After a minute, Flora walked in. At first, I wasn't sure if it was Flora or her sister, but she smiled and waved as she made her way across the room.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi, Austin."

"Say, where's the restroom?"

"Oh my gosh." She shook her head. "It completely sucks. There're no toilets in *any* of the common rooms and none at all in the dungeons. I don't know who planned the layout of this place, but they must have been seriously disturbed."

She went on about how terrible it was to have to walk fifteen minutes to the bathroom every day. It did sound as if it must really suck for girls. For me, it wasn't a big deal.

As we exited the common room, we ran into a huge Slipperen kid. At about seven feet tall, he would have looked like Haggard's son, except he was clean-shaven and dressed in new robes.

"Hi." I moved well out of his way.

"Did you see a house-elf in there?"

"House-elf?"

"Yeah, you know, little monster with huge evil eyes, ears the size of rulers, and a nose as sharp as a razor?" He glared through the door. "One's been stalking me all day." He glanced over his shoulder.

"Umm, I think it's clear. I would probably remember seeing something like that. Are there many of these monsters at Hogwarts?" I asked.

"Hundreds."

Flora stepped into the hallway. "Oh, hi, Miles."

"House-elf?" He slowly peered into the room.

"You're good." She smiled.

I followed Flora through a maze of passageways and corridors.

"Those house-elves must be something to scare a kid that big."

"They're completely harmless." She rolled her eyes. "Miles has some strange fear of them. I heard he didn't sleep at all his first year."

"How'd the school get the name Hogwarts, anyway?"

"I don't really know. Legend says it used to be called, Porridge Court, but they changed the name to Hogwarts after the first Headmaster. He wrote a famous play about it, but no one really knows."

We stepped inside the Great Hall. I didn't think I could find my way back to the common room by myself.

I sat down next to Flora and looked at all the food. "Is this where they serve all the meals?"

"Yep. I have to go ask Millicent and Pansy about their schedules. Tuck in. I'll be back."

Tons and tons of food lay piled on the tables. Half of it would surely go to waste. A lot of it was English stuff and looked terrible. They had big cookies for breakfast, but they were plain and super hard. The ham was mostly fat, and all the milk was warm. Still, with so much to choose from, I found plenty to eat. I didn't talk to anyone though. The Slipperen kids all seemed to be whispering to each other, which kind of made sense, seeing how a lot of the other kids were giving us dirty looks. I began to wish I was in another house, any other house.

"How you doing?" Flora asked me when she came back.

"Who are those two guys who keep staring over at our table?"

"That's Harry Plotter and his sidekick, Ronald Weasley. You do know who Harry Plotter is, don't you?"

"The kid with the scar?" He hadn't bothered to comb his hair, and a wicked-looking scar stood out on his forehead. I wondered why his parents hadn't taken him to a dermatologist to get that fixed. I knew a girl with a cleft palate, and it only took a few visits to make her scar go almost completely away. The other guy had bright-red hair and was dressed in shabby clothes.

"Harry Plotter. He's the Boy Who Lived. Thinks he's the savior of the world or something."

"What? Do you mean like Jesus?"

"Just about. The Dark Lord, the most powerful evil wizard ever, tried to kill him, but his mother protected him. The spell backfired and killed the Dark Lord, leaving Harry with that scar. I think he doesn't comb his hair so it's always visible."

"The Dark Lord—that sounds kind of racist."

"Umm, no, it's not. My point is Harry didn't defeat the Dark Lord. It was his mom, but he acts as if he did it himself."

"Seems a little disrespectful to his mother's memory."

"You want to hear disrespectful? Last year, Malfoy went up and introduced himself, and Plotter wouldn't even shake his hand—just left him hanging."

"Why?"

"Because the Malfoys are *always* in Slipperen, of course." She picked up a piece of toast. "We're the best house. We win the House Cup almost every year, except last year when Dumblesnore fixed it. But the Dark Lord was in Slipperen, so that somehow makes it okay to hate us."

"Man, that's pretty messed up."

"And Harry's friend Ron isn't much better." She looked at another kid with flame-red hair and a homemade sweater so big the cuffs draped onto his food. "His older brothers are always playing dirty tricks on Slipperens. Just yesterday, they put two second years in the hospital wing with oversized

goblin noses. It's going to take a week to shrink them and another to remove the warts. And Ron, he hates anyone who has more money than his family, which is everyone here, except maybe Haggard.

"The pair's only real friend is that frizzy-haired girl, Hermione. She's got a *major* superiority complex." She continued to spread the same jam over and over on a piece of toast. "Millicent Bulltode was assigned to do a report with her on the Goblin Rebellion of 1612, and Hermione told her she wanted to do the report all by herself so they'd be sure to get an A-plus. Can you believe that?"

"Did she tell the teacher she was the only one who worked on the report?"

"No, but that's not the point."

"So they both got As?"

"But she didn't let her help!"

"I get it. They aren't very friendly."

"No one's friendly when you're a Slipperen."

Flora took me to my first class, and we planned to meet up for lunch, as we had Potions together that afternoon. I sat down in back and was surprised when several other Slipperens plopped down next to me.

"Hey!"

"Hey!"

"Hey." We all exchanged heys.

"Thought you were a first year?" asked a fat Slipperen kid who kept pulling candy out of his robes. His fingers were covered with chocolate.

"I'm going to be thirteen next month."

"Crazy," another kid said. They didn't introduce themselves or say much after that.

I didn't understand much of what Professor McDonagall said, but I tried all the spells. None of them really worked. I did manage to get my teacup to grow a tail, which seemed to be about as good as most of the kids from Gryffinbore were doing.

Professor McDonagall—still wearing her oversized witch hat, by the way—called me up when the class was over.

"Hermione Danger, would you come here, too?"

"Mr. Winters," she started as the fuzzy-haired girl walked up. "I understand you are going to try to catch up on your classes?"

"I guess so," I said.

"What a resounding display of commitment." She looked at Hermione. "Miss Danger, Austin Winters is a new student. Unfortunately, he's also a second year. I've spoken to Professor Dumbledore, and he suggests we have him learn the spells included in the first-year syllabus and dispense with the rest of the curriculum."

Hermione said, "I'm awfully busy this term. Isn't there someone else who could help him, maybe someone from Slipperen?"

"Miss Danger, there is no student better qualified to help Mr. Winters than yourself. However, if you are not willing to tutor someone from Slipperen—"

"No, it's fine. I'll find a way to fit him in."

"Thank you, dear." She took three steps and then made a little jump, turned into a cat, and ran out the door.

"Whoa! Did you see that?"

"So when should we meet?"

"The teacher—she just turned into a cat!"

"Professor McDonagall is an accomplished animagus."

"A what?"

"A person who can transfigure into an animal is called an animagus. It's an exceedingly difficult skill to master."

"Transfigure?"

She shook her head impatiently. "I can work with you Saturday morning."

"Saturday morning," I said unenthusiastically.

"Meet me at the Quiltage pitch eight a.m., sharp."

"The what? What?"

"Quitlage pitch." She huffed. "The big pitch right outside the school."

"What's a pitch?"

"The field with huge grandstands!"

"Oh, that thing."

I wasn't eager to get up early on a Saturday, but I was really worried I might get kicked out if I didn't really apply myself, so I agreed and headed in search of my next class.

Even with the newly sown lining, my wool robes really itched, and by lunch I wanted to rip them off. I tried getting to know a few of my fellow Slipperens while I ate. They were talking about Quitlage. One of the kids tried to explain it to me. Apparently, it was played with a bunch of balls while flying on brooms and trying to maim the other players. Besides that, it didn't make much sense.

I still hadn't made any friends, and I even thought some of the kids in my own house were giving me dirty looks. The highlight of lunch, though, was when Harry Plotter's friend Ron got a letter that yelled at him in his mom's voice. Everyone laughed.

"What the heck was that?" I asked after the letter burst into flames.

"Oh, Harry and Ron stole a car and crashed it into a tree last night," Flora said. "I heard they'd been drinking."

"Stole a car? Isn't that grand theft?" I shook my head. "Why weren't they arrested?"

"The school covered it up because he's the *Boy Who Lived*. All they got was detention."

"Wow, I guess they really are troublemakers." I wondered why Ron hadn't just left the hall before opening his Youwler—that's what the screaming letter was called. I figured opening it in the Great Hall had guaranteed him a lot of attention.

After lunch, Flora and I both had Defense Against the Dark Arts, which was good because there were at least three moving staircases between the Great Hall and that class. Who the heck thought of installing moving staircases in a school? They made no sense at all, unless you *wanted* students showing up late to class or falling to their deaths.

Harry Plotter was in the class, and before it started, he caused a stir by yelling at his best friend, Ron, telling him to shut up. If this was how he treated his friends, maybe all the bad stuff I'd heard

about him was true.

The teacher—Luckhart —was pretty funny. He kept talking about himself, saying how great he was. It was so over the top that he was obviously making fun of himself. Just to make sure we got the point, he handed out a test—except it was all about him: his birthday, his favorite color, that sort of junk.

I had just about decided that this was my favorite class when Luckhart pulled out a cage stuffed with what looked like purple Smurfs with wings. Turned out they were pixies, evil Cornish pixies that Luckhart unleashed on his unsuspecting class. Once free, they proceeded to attack everyone in the room. We were supposed to cast spells to stop them. It felt a little bit like learning to swim by getting thrown into the deep end.

The Slipperen kids all huddled in a corner and protected each other. It was a good thing they had my back because I had yet to cast any spell successfully, let alone one at a flying rodent-thing zooming about the room like a jet fighter.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione seemed to think the whole thing was a joke. I think they were even laughing when the pixies picked up one of their fellow Gryffinbores by his ears—the kid was horrified, crying, and begging for help—and dangled him about twenty feet off the ground. A minute later, the chandelier he hung from came crashing down. It was a miracle he wasn't killed. Maybe Slipperen wasn't such a bad house to be in after all.

When the bell rang, I darted out but ran into Luckhart in the hall. Reluctantly, I asked him about the extra tutoring Smape had told me to get.

"Oh, I'm sorry, chap," Luckhart said. "I'm far too busy answering fan mail with Harry Plotter. But how about a signed photo?"

"Umm, no, thanks anyway." I had no idea Harry Plotter got fan mail, but I was kinda relieved. I mean relieved that Professor Luckhart was busy because I wasn't sure there was much he could teach me beyond stand-up comedy. Still, I felt a pang of resentment. My education being put off in favor of Harry Plotter's fan mail.

That night, as I took off my robes, a loud thud came from outside our room, like someone

knocking over furniture. Then a gray glowing head poked through our door. "Anyone awake?" the specter screamed before entering our room and jumping on the bed next to me. He knocked over a stack of books and ripped off some bed curtains before disappearing through the far wall.

Moments later, another ghost—this one I recognized as the Slipperen House ghost, the Bumbling Baron—marched through our door. He started to speak, but one of my roommates, Rinsett Crabbe, pointed and said, "He went that way." The Baron leapt off his feet towards the far wall, diving straight through me in the process.

Goosebumps welled up on my arms, and I looked down, expecting to find my shirt soaked in cold water. But my clothes were dry, and I was left with a lingering chill. I couldn't figure out how the ghosts could rip sheets and knock stuff over but then pass through students and stone walls.

Nobody acted as if this was an unusual occurrence, and when I finished changing I lay in bed thinking about my first day at magic school. I'd seen teachers turn into animals, passed through ghosts, and almost been killed by flying magic rodents. I lay there thinking about how the animated paintings weren't TVs mounted behind fancy frames. The moving stairs weren't powered by pistons. The teachers weren't wearing costumes or performing tricks. The magic was *real*, all real. Only now did I begin to accept, to really believe it. My head swam. I didn't think I'd be able to sleep, but soon I was out.

The rest of the week went by in a blur. Unlike school in America, at Hogwarts, you took different classes on different days. I had trouble keeping track of my schedule, let alone finding actual classrooms. Flora was a lot of help, and anytime I was lost, all I had to do was find kids with a Slipperen emblem on their robes, and they'd give me directions. As bad of a reputation as Slipperens had, I didn't have a bad experience with any of them—except maybe Plotter's archnemeses, Drano Malfoy. When I asked him which way to Potions, he just pointed down and smirked.

Friday night, a couple of the kids from my dorm invited me to play Spin the Wand. I wanted to fit in, but I had to get up early and—even though I didn't know how it was played—it didn't sound like a game I was up for.

Chapter 6 – Stood Up

There were no electrical outlets in our dorm. In fact, I hadn't seen one anywhere in the castle. I couldn't believe this school was up to any sort of safety codes. Even though the place with lit exclusively with fire, there wasn't a single extinguisher to be found.

I'd borrowed a windup alarm clock from a skinny kid called Nott so I could make sure I got up early on Saturday. At seven a.m., the alarm went off (I'd set it early because I knew I'd have to find my way to the restrooms and then the Great Hall by myself). Besides ringing, the clock smoked, and the smoke formed into the shape of a snake, which then hissed at me. I gave the clock back immediately.

Using one of my notebooks, I'd made several maps of how to get places. The problem was you couldn't always retrace your steps. Some corridors would lead you to one area of the castle when you went down them and to a different one when you went back. I thought there were even a few that would just dump you somewhere different each time you took them.

Still, I managed to get to the Great Hall early, just before seven thirty. Several of the teachers were already eating or even finishing up, including the headmaster, who kept glancing over at me.

A short, skinny, malnourished, monster-looking creature with a large nose and spindly ears mopped up some spilled food with what appeared to be a magic mop. I figured this had to be one of the house-elves that Miles was so unnerved by. Almost naked, dressed only in a towel, it was so short it hardly came up to my knees. I poked its shoulder just to make sure it was real.

"Ungrateful children," he mumbled.

I started to apologize, but he snapped his fingers and was gone with a loud crack and a tiny puff of smoke.

After seeing that the creatures that served our food were mostly naked, I lost my appetite and headed down to the Quiltage field. It was easy to find. You could see it from about half the castle windows.

The Gryffinbore and Slipperen teams shared the field, practicing on opposite sides. A few kids sat in the stands, including Colin, who must have Snapped a hundred pictures with an antique camera—

but no Hermione Danger. I waited, but at eight thirty, I gave up.

What a little witch, I thought then laughed, realizing she really was a witch, and a fairly little one at that.

Back in my common room, I asked around where the payphones were but was told phones were for Muddles and to send my message via owl. I could just picture my dad in some important meeting with his new bosses and an owl soaring through the window, smashing into the table. I wasn't sending an owl.

I spent a few hours studying *A History of Magic, Volume 1*, until the guy in the bed next to me came in. I knew who he was, Miles Blechley, the big fifth year with the fear of elves, but I hadn't spoken to him since that first day because he always seemed to be in a terrible mood.

"Hey, Austin." I wasn't surprised he knew my name—as a Muggle-born American in Slipperen House, I was something of an oddity—but I was surprised he used it.

"What's up?"

"Want to play some Exploding Snap?"

I hesitated. The Slipperen guys played some pretty dangerous games. "Is it safe?"

He half smiled. "It's just like regular Snap, 'cept the cards explode. Not enough to lose a finger or anything."

"We don't play Snap in America."

"No problem. I'll teach you."

We played Exploding Snap for the rest of the afternoon. I lost three galleons on credit (no idea how much real money that was) but no fingers, and I thought I made a friend.

When I got back to my dormitory, an awkward pile of books and supplies lay at the foot of my bed along with two new pairs of robes, a pair of gloves, my own set of books, and even a chocolate frog.

Books showing up and robes cleaned mysteriously at night were nice, but I didn't like the idea of someone or something sneaking around my bed, especially while I slept. Still, here were all the supplies I needed, and my robes no longer smelled like old cheese. I didn't complain.

The frog jumped when I opened it, probably some kind of enchantment. It almost got away, but its second hop landed it right into my mouth. Which sounds cool until you realize there's a frog struggling in your mouth. Chocolate or not, I kept imagining it moving around in my stomach—super creepy.

There was a note listing all the supplies, and it was signed in rough scribbles by Haggard. I wasn't sure who'd paid for all this, and I thought about thanking him, but he was way too intimidating to seriously consider speaking to.

I was thrilled to have my own books. It meant no more having to find a Slipperen to share with or using old secondhand books the teachers had. The one from Potions had been the worst, with pages falling out, and someone had scribbled and crossed things out on almost every page. I hoped now I might actually start to learn some magic.

During dinner, I kept looking over at Hermione. I caught her eye a few times, but she'd look away. When I got up to leave, she got up too. I had a feeling she was following me. I tried to walk quickly.

"Austin," she yelled. "Wait up."

I kept walking.

"Austin."

I walked faster.

I didn't hear the exact spell she used, but a second later, something smacked into my back, and I started walking super slow, like in those nightmares where you can't run.

"What the—" I said as she caught up with me.

"Sorry." She glanced down at my legs. "I could tell you weren't going to stop."

"So you... you what? Hexed me?"

"Hardly." She tossed a mop of hair out of her face. "It's a children's spell, used for playing tag—magic tag, that is. It should wear off anytime."

Sure enough, though my legs felt like lead, I was able to walk at a normal pace. "Whatever."

"Where are you heading?"

"Professor Flichwick's for extra work."

"Good. I'm heading to the second floor too."

"Great." I tried to sound irritated. Really, I was glad to be with someone who could find her way around the castle.

"Listen, I wanted to apologize about this morning."

"Umm."

"I was waiting for you at the pitch when I ran into some trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Malfoy," she said as if that explained everything. Then she put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry. I almost forgot you're in Slipperen."

"No problem. I'm not sure I like that guy much."

"Really? You're in Slipperen, and you don't like Drano Malfoy?"

"Didn't say I didn't like him. We're just not friends." We walked for a minute in silence before I asked, "So what exactly did Malfoy do to you?"

"It wasn't just me." Her voice cracked. "He called me a bad name and caused one of my best friends to get cursed."

"What'd he call you?"

"It's a foul name for someone who's Muddle-born. I don't want to say it."

"I'm Muddle-born," I said as if just realizing it. "Come on, tell me. I know nothing about magic. How will I know if someone yells it at me?"

"Fine." She looked around to make sure we wouldn't be overheard and whispered, "Muddblood. It's not a word any respectable witch or wizard would use."

"Muddblood? Is that all?"

"Don't say it."

"Whatever." I started to turn the wrong way, but Hermione tugged my robes, pulling me down the correct corridor.

"How about we try again? Tonight, say eight o'clock, in the library... if you can find your way."

"I can find my way. It's on the third floor." I tried to sound confident. "But make sure you show up

this time."

She smiled but didn't say another word, and as we entered the classroom, she went to the front with the Gryffinbores. I sat in back with Slipperen.

Chapter 7 – The Darkest Dungeon

That night, I took my books with me to the Great Hall so I could go straight to the library. I got there early, and there weren't many kids at the Slipperen table when Hannah Albot sat down with another girl I recognized but didn't know. "Hey, Austin."

"Hi." This was the first time I'd seen anyone from another house sit at our table.

"How are you finding Hogwarts?"

"Fine. I mean, it's a little difficult being in Slipperen. But I like the school."

"Rebecca's older brother was in Slipperen." She looked at her friend.

"Really?" I was surprised. I'd heard most families stuck to one house.

"He's in Azkaban prison for assaulting Muddles," Rebecca said.

"Okay."

"So are you friends with Miles Blechley?"

"I know Miles a little."

"Is he nice?" Rebecca asked.

"I guess so."

"And he doesn't mind that you are Muggle-born?"

"Don't know. I don't think so."

"See, I told you." She turned to Rebecca and nodded. Then they both stood up and started walking away. "Nice talking to you, Austin," Hannah said. They went back to the Huffalump table and immediately started gossiping with Sharron Bones, Zoey Smith, and a couple other girls I didn't know.

I ate a quick dinner before heading to the library, making sure I had plenty of time to spare. I'd

never been to the library, but I'd written down directions from both Flora and Miles, although both seemed to take completely different routes to get there.

I tried following the directions, but after heading up a stairway to the third floor, I passed through a hall and found myself back in the dungeon. It was easy to tell when you were in the dungeon since it was dark and damp with no windows or paintings on the walls. I almost turned back, but I'd learned when I got lost it was usually easier to keep walking until I ran into a picture, suit of armor, or pig statue I recognized. The suits of armor were particularly helpful. Most would point in the right direction if you asked nicely.

I kept walking forward, and even though my eyes adjusted, the hallways seemed to be getting darker. Finally, I pulled out my wand and cried, "*Lumenos*." A feeble shaft of light sprang from the tip then fizzled, lighting my way for a split second.

I kept casting the spell. Each time, it lit or sparked with just enough light for me to make out that I was getting more and more lost—like trying to find my way with a lighter that sparked but wouldn't light. I kept going forward.

I bumped into a door. I felt around for a handle but couldn't find one. I felt cold steel bars. The whole door was made of them. But they weren't all horizontal or vertical—they seemed laid out more like a maze. I knocked on the huge door, once, twice. A metallic echo filled the halls.

I thought about casting *Lumenos* again. A voice spoke out of the darkness, soft and deep but vicious and menacing. It chilled the blood in my veins. "Open the door. My master calls. Let me out. Must rip. Must tear. Must kill."

Here's an interesting observation: when you want someone to open a door, "must kill" is one of the things least likely to get them to comply. In fact, the only thing less likely to get the door open is, "must kill *you*."

"Sorry, I don't know how," I whispered back, almost mimicking the voice.

Right as I said it, there was a click, then another and another, like the bars on a safe clanking open. In the pitch black, the metal door creaked. A cool wind danced on my face. The door was open.

A terrible smell assaulted me. It was like a sewer but worse, like a long-forgotten porta-potty left

fermenting for years. The lingering stench reminded me of the time we came back from vacation and I'd forgotten about getting someone to feed my hamster.

I gagged. Something brushed against my legs. Large and muscular, it instantly took me back to my nightmare. I tried to run, but my feet wouldn't move. As the thing passed me, it whispered, "Thanksss."

I stood paralyzed for all of five minutes. I wanted to go, run, flee, but I couldn't. Finally, after my heart slowed down, I managed to turn around and say, "*Lumenos*." Enough light sparked to reveal a huge statue of a snake standing at the intersection of three hallways. I took the left corridor and started running.

Five minutes later, the faint glimmer of torches appeared up ahead. Finally, I got to an old moldy tapestry of what looked like the first Quiltage match ever. I recognized it because several of the Beaters had dismounted their brooms and were whacking the other team's Seeker senseless. I was close to the common room.

When I got to the library, I was late, *way* late.

Only a few students lingered, and off in a corner sat Hermione, hair sprouting from a book.

She didn't hear me as I walked up. She was reading something called *Voyages with Vampires*. I figured it was probably one of those teen vampire romance novels.

"Hey," I whispered.

"You're late." She looked irritated.

"Shhh, you're in a library." I put my finger to my lips. "Respect the books."

"I respect the books." She started shaking. Apparently, I'd struck a nerve. "No one respects books more than me."

"Then why aren't you using your library voice?"

She stared at me with the biggest frown imaginable. I smiled in return.

"You're *really* late," she whispered.

"Sorry, got lost. Ended up in some dark, stinky part of the dungeon. I couldn't see a thing."

"Why didn't you just cast *Lumenos*?" She put her book away.

"I did, about fifty-two times."

"You mean you can't even cast *Lumenos* properly?" Her face filled with shock.

"That's why I need your help," I admitted. "I can't cast anything."

"Nothing?" She didn't look me in the eye. "Maybe you are a Muddle."

"So, what? So are you, and everyone says you're the best witch in your year."

"They do?" Her cheeks flushed a shade of red. "Still, I'm Muddle-born. That's different than being a Muddle. If you're a witch or wizard but born to nonmagic parents, then you're Muddle-born."

"I'm sure you can help me."

"Maybe... Let me see your wand."

"I got it from the lost and found." I handed it to her. "It doesn't have any cracks or anything."

"This is a very peculiar wand. These look like berries carved into it."

"So that's what those are." I'd been thinking walnuts.

"Well, it's not as good as a wand that's chosen you, but it should do." She wasn't making any sense.

She handed the wand back. "We'll have to start with the simplest basics, I'm afraid."

We worked on *Lumenos* first, and after about five minutes, I got it. My wand stayed lit! Turned out wand movement was as important as pronouncing the words correctly. For *Lumenos*, it was a short, very short flick of the wrist. It reminded me of Snapping your fingers. When you're a little kid, it seems impossible until you do it once, and soon it's simple.

She found a copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*, and we flew through it. We did each spell until I got it right once. Hermione always knew exactly where I was messing it up. We got all the way to *Expelloramus*, though I only knocked her quill off the table, not out of her hand.

"Oh my gosh. It's almost curfew."

"I didn't realize the time," I said. "But thanks. You've taught me so much."

"You haven't learned as much as you think." She handed me the book. "Practice each spell a hundred times."

"A hundred times?"

"There's an old witches' saying, 'It takes a hundred casts before you grasp.'"

I sighed in protest.

"I want you to finish this book by next week. Mark any spells you have trouble with, and we'll review them."

"About that... Seeing as you're such a gifted instructor, I was wondering if you could help me with another subject? Dark Arts?"

She started putting away her stuff but smiled a bit when I mentioned how gifted she was. "It's Defense Against the Dark Arts, and you should ask Professor Luckhart to help you. He's an expert."

"I did. He said he was too busy helping Harry Potter mail out signed photos."

"He said *what*?"

"Inside voices." I zipped my backpack. "Apparently, Harry gets tons of fan mail, requests for photos and stuff."

"I don't believe it."

"I think it's true. When I mentioned it to Snape, he said it was typical Potter grandstanding."

"You told Snape?"

"Had to. He asked why I wasn't tutoring with Luckhart."

"Austin, I know Harry Potter, and he has *never* signed a fan photo in his life. Even for Colin Creevey."

"If you say so." She looked a little irritated with me. "So any chance you can help me with Dark Arts—Defense?"

She huffed as if I were asking her for a kidney. "If you can find your way to the Quidditch pitch on Saturday, I can spare an hour during the Gryffindor practice."

That night, I had trouble falling asleep. I'd only just passed out when a voice woke me up, the same cold, vile, bass voice from the dungeon. "Come to me. I will kill you." I jumped up from bed. A few of the guys weren't in their beds, probably in the common room. No one seemed to be awake in my dorm.

I didn't hear the voice again, but I didn't sleep much that night.

Chapter 8 – The Wand

Friday evening, I sat in the common room practicing *Mucus Eruptus*, a spell they don't teach in class. It makes one's nose spew gobs and gobs of snot uncontrollably.

I practiced on Miles's ferret while he smoked.

"So you're saying that not one student has a CD player?" I had just started listening to The Cure and had bought their *Wish* CD right before we flew to London. I was dying to play it.

"Wouldn't work even if they had one. Most electronics don't work here."

Miles puffed away on his cigarette while reading the witches' newspaper, the *Prophet Post*, a paper printed with magic so the pictures moved, which just blew my mind.

"You know smoking causes cancer."

"I know." He didn't look up. "I try not to inhale unless I'm practicing blowing smoke dragons."

"Still, it's addictive."

"I only do it to tick my parents off."

"They aren't here."

"Yep, but they still know I'm doing it."

"Seems as if you could find a safer way to tick them off." I tried *Mucus Eruptus*, but the ferret just sneezed.

"It's hard to piss off your parents when they're into the black arts."

"The black arts? Aren't those illegal?"

"Not really." He glanced at the ferret. "It's not as if they are raising the dead and stuff. They just believe life is more than one shade. You can live in the light and the dark."

"Oh, and smoking upsets them?"

"Yeah, they think only Muddles smoke cigarettes. They keep trying to get me to smoke a pipe. They claim Merlin smoked a pipe. It's total nonsense."

"*Mucus Eruptus*." The ferret shook its head as snot spewed out.

Miles dropped his paper and quickly cast the counter curse. "You got it."

I'd been sitting with my back to the door, but I knew something was up when everyone stopped, looked up, and stirred in silence.

I craned my neck towards the door. Professor Snape stood there like he was looking for someone to curse. This was the first time I'd seen him down here since the day I'd arrived. A couple guys had warned me that since the Potions classroom wasn't far, if we made too much noise, he'd hear, come in, and start cursing everyone. If we stayed quiet, he pretty much left us to our own devices.

But he didn't cast any curses. He walked across the room, directly towards me. "Mr. Winters, Headmaster Dumbledore requires your presence."

I looked over at Miles. His cigarette nowhere to be seen. He shrugged.

Snape, already back at the entrance, turned and shouted, "Now!"

I jumped up and ran after him.

It still surprised me how fast he walked. I almost had to run to keep up. Quickly, we made our way to a very large alcove with a huge stone gargoyle in it.

"Sherbet lemon," Snape said, and the stone gargoyle turned, revealing steps leading up. He pointed his wand towards them. "Off you go, and I do hope you haven't bothered to unpack."

Slowly, with trembling legs, I made my way up. The office door stood open. I went in.

Dumbledore sat at his desk, reading an old book that wanted to crumble in his hands. I realized I had no idea how to address a headmaster. "Pardon me, Mister, Headmaster, sir."

"Austin Winters, come in, my dear boy. Come in." He stood up and put his arms out, almost as if he wanted to hug me.

I took two steps. "You asked to see me, sir?"

"Yes, yes, come closer." He beckoned me near. "I wanted to see how your first month has gone."

His office was large and round, at least three stories high, and stuffed with loads of junk that looked as though it should be on display at a steampunk museum. Portraits of sleeping wizards lined the walls. The Sorting Hat sat on a shelf, and a huge, magnificent, but sort of scary-looking bird with bright-red and golden-yellow-tipped feathers sat on a perch next to Dumbledore.

I stood on the far side of his massive wooden desk. "Great, everything's going great. I guess I'm

not a Muddle after all. I mean, I'm a Muddle magician." I pulled out my wand as if I was ready to cast a spell.

"I never doubted it, never—" He stopped and stared at my wand. Something gleamed deep in his eye, almost like longing. "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind a little test?"

His gaze still hadn't drifted from my wand, so I offered it. "A test?"

"Oh, nothing elaborate, maybe a simple disarming spell." He took my wand. "Let's say we swap wands. What is it Muddles say? Just for the fun of it?"

"Okay."

He spun my wand around in his fingertips, almost as if he were greeting an old friend. We stood in awkward silence before he said, "I take it you know *Expelloramus*?"

"Yes, sir." I didn't mention that I hadn't *Expelloramus*'ed anything other than a quill out of an empty Butterbeer bottle.

He handed me his wand.

"Hey, this looks like my wand." I examined it closely. "They're identical."

"Yes, yes, they are."

"What a coincidence," I said, trying to remember if I'd seen any two other wands that looked the same. "Isn't that strange?"

"Very strange, indeed. I take it you procured it from the lost and found?" He lifted my wand, holding it loosely. "When you are ready."

I took a deep breath. "*Expelloramus*!"

The wand flew out of his hand and landed, not far away as I'd seen other students do, but on the table right between us.

"Excellent, excellent," he cried.

"I'm still working on it."

He stared down at the wand on his desk. He started to reach out, but stopped. "Take it, Austin. It's yours now."

I picked up my wand and put his down on the desk in the spot where mine had been.

"Anything else?" I held my breath, hoping he wouldn't want to see more spells.

"No, that will do quite well, thank you." I turned and started towards the door. "Unless... Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

My heart stopped. I thought about the strange metal door and the whispered voice that rattled me to my bones. I wanted to say something, but what? I wasn't even sure what had happened. And how would I explain not being able to even cast a simple *Lumenos* spell?

"No, sir."

He nodded, and I dashed down the stairs.

It was past curfew. No one was in the halls. I made my way back the best I could, but most of the torches were out, and the corridors all looked different. I'd made it to the dungeon, close to the common room, when I heard the voice.

"Kill... tear... kill."

Chapter 9 – Quiltage or Die!

It was the same voice, cold and shallow. "Rip... tear... kill."

"*Lumenos*!" I cried. Maybe it was all the studying or being scared, but a huge shaft of light, like a lightning bolt frozen in time, erupted from my wand. I felt the magic coursing through it, and I gripped my wand with both hands. A second later, the light dimmed, but it still shone brightly, like a floodlight. I raced to the common room, only extinguishing the light when I reached the safety of its damp walls.

Inside, only the usual couples were making out in their corners. Miles was talking to one of the prefects, an older guy with bad teeth, who looked at me, shaking his head while we walked away.

"Hey, Austin." Miles nodded to me as the prefect walked away.

"What's got him?"

"It's nothing... really." Miles took a breath. "He thinks you're Muddle-born."

"Who doesn't?"

"Me, for one."

"You? Why?"

"There's no way, I mean zero, that the Sorting Hat would put a Muggle-born in Slipperen. I guess the hat could make a mistake, but not one like that."

"I wish more of my housemates saw it the same way."

"They will. Just give 'em some time." Miles rolled a cigarette butt in his hand. "What you doing out so late?"

"Nothing." I didn't want to mention going to Dumblesnore's office.

"You've gotta watch out." He threw the butt into the fire. "The house-elves come out after curfew."

"What is it with you and house-elves? Everyone says they're harmless."

"That's what they want you to believe." We started walking back to our dorm. "Did you know they can do magic without a wand? They're super-resistant to spells too."

"I didn't know that." That didn't make them seem bad.

"The little buggers can apparate anywhere. Even in and out of Hogworts. It's only a matter of time before they rise up and take over."

"Crazy," I said, still much more worried about snakes than elves.

That night, I had the nightmare again. Huge and scaly, rough with muscles thick as ropes, the snake slithered around me, wrapping, squeezing, tightening around my torso as it slid towards my head.

Even though it was useless, I struggled against its grip.

It hissed, opening its huge mouth as it lunged at my head.

I screamed and woke up everyone in my dorm. Fortunately, they didn't know it was me who'd screamed, and after some muttering and Miles checking under his bed for house-elves, my roommates were back asleep in a couple minutes. I couldn't even close my eyes. I just stared at the two snakes intertwined on the headboard until the sun came up.

*

It was early in the morning, and the cool air seemed to be rising off the grass. I didn't wear my

robes but instead had on jeans and an ugly sweater my dad had made me pack. It wasn't Ron Weasley, homemade, oversized ugly—just normal sweater ugly.

Hermione sat, book in hand, on the lowest row of the stands (the grass was still wet), watching Harry and the rest of the Gryffinbore team practice.

"I don't get this Quitlage sport. It's so barbaric."

She looked up. "I'm in favor of some rules changes myself. But I wouldn't go as far as barbaric."

"Umm, yeah. There're four players whose sole job it is to hit other kids with hard leather balls.

They even call them *Beaters*!"

"I'm not exactly a die-hard fan, but it's not *that* bad, not really."

"Miles told me there's at least one major injury every match."

"Are you here to study or debate the comparative dangers of Quitlage?" She slammed her book shut.

I took out my wand and cast about a dozen spells in a row, nailing all of them.

"Wow, you've really improved. It's almost as if you're using a new wand," Hermione said.

"There are still a few spells I'm having trouble with."

"We can go over them, but remember, no wizard masters every spell. There'll always be some you struggle with while others come easy."

I guessed my spell casting had impressed more than just Hermione because the captain of the Gryffinbore Quitlage team came flying over on his broom.

"Hey, you're that American... the Slipperen." His eyes narrowed. "What do you think you are doing here?"

"Umm... studying."

"Studying our tactics, I'll wager."

"Oliver!" Hermione cried. "I invited him. He's not a spy. He doesn't know the first thing about Quitlage."

"I doubt that." His eyes didn't move from me. "What better cover than the ignorant American?"

"Now, just one second." I stood up.

"Boys!" Hermione jumped to her feet. "Stop it. Oliver, go back to your game. I'll vouch for Austin, at least that he's not a spy."

He looked from me to Hermione. "Well, we won't be practicing our super-secret plays in front of him."

"You do that," I said. Then added, "Quitlage is stupid. Try baseball—with a round bat."

"Baseball on brooms. Only American wizards would be so silly." He took a few steps then flew off.

"They play baseball on brooms?" I asked. When she didn't answer, I added, "What a jerk."

"You'll have to cut him some slack. Quitlage is his life, and he's not used to nice Slipperens." She sat down.

"Maybe that's because no one gives us a chance." I wasn't ready to sit. "Maybe that's because everyone hates us just because we're in the wrong house."

"Maybe it's because you're all friends with Drano Malfoy?"

"It's not Malfoy that makes everyone hate us. It's the Dark Lord."

Hermione's eyes just about popped out of her head. "Don't say that. Don't ever say that. What if Harry heard you?"

"What? Heard me say what?"

She pulled my sleeve, and I sat down. She whispered, "*Dark Lord*. Don't call him that. Only his followers call him that."

I didn't tell her I'd heard half a dozen kids in Slipperen say it. "What do I call him then?"

"He Who Must Not Be Named." Her words grew even softer.

"Seriously, *He Who Must Not Be Named*? That's stupid."

"He has a name, but we don't use it or even mention him. You know he killed both Harry's parents?"

"Yeah, I've heard all about the Boy Who Lived. Thinks that it makes him some sort of saint."

"He does not think he's special." She wasn't whispering anymore. "It's everyone else who says that. Harry hates it."

"Anyway, he's a big part of the reason everyone from Slipperen is treated like second-class citizens. Imagine how it would feel if you showed up for your first day of school and everyone automatically hated you?"

"Hate is a little strong."

"Loathed then."

"I guess you have a point. Not about Harry, though." She wasn't looking at me but watching someone block a shot on one of the round goal thingies. "But it's not as if most Slipperens make an effort to fit in."

"That's because we have to watch each other's backs. I admit, some of the Slipperens are really boneheads, but every one of them has my back."

"Even Drano Malfoy?"

"Maybe not him."

"Oh, I almost forgot." She reached into her backpack. "I brought you something."

She handed me a book. "*So Your Daughter Is a Witch*. What's this?"

"It's the book the school gave my parents when I got my Hogworts letter. I'm assuming you didn't get one. I mean, they have a wizard one too, but they say almost the same thing."

I took the book. "Thanks."

"Read it yourself, and then give it to your parents and I'll loan you my copy of *Our Magic Ourselves*."

"My dad," I corrected her. "I'm not sure I'm going to tell him. I think he might make me drop out. Americans aren't as open to these things as Europeans."

"Then just read it yourself. It's loaded with stuff you really need to know to get around in the wizarding world."

Hermione left when the Gryffinbore practice was over, but the pitch was warming up, so I stayed behind while the Huffalump team arrived.

Hannah came walking up with Rebecca and a girl I didn't know. "Austin." She tossed her hair. "You totally lied to me."

"I did?"

"Yes, you said you weren't friends with Miles."

"I said we weren't good friends, and that was a while ago. We're pretty close now."

"So Daphne Greenegas was telling the truth. He doesn't care that you're Muddle-born?"

"Actually, he doesn't think I'm really Muddle-born." They looked disappointed, so I added, "But

he wouldn't care. He's not like that."

"See I told you, Samantha." Both Hannah and Rebecca turned to Samantha and started giggling.

"What's this all about?"

"Oh, nothing." Hannah stood up. "We've gotta go. Bye."

"Bye." I wondered if I'd ever figure out girls.

"See you," said Rebecca.

Samantha just smiled shyly.

*

"Austin, get up." Miles whispered. It was early on a Sunday morning, and I huddled under my warm sheets.

"What, what is it?" Still half asleep, I asked, "Snakes?"

"No, mate. It's important. There's something I have to teach you." He turned up a lantern.

I rolled over to the edge of my bed. Dressed in slacks with a gray overcoat and gloves, Miles bore more than a passing resemblance to Haggard. I could tell he planned to head outside.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes with one hand and grabbed my jeans with the other.

"Put on your robes over those." Miles held the leather case he kept his broom in.

"I have a jacket." I avoided my robes whenever possible.

"Robes on." He knelt down beside my bed so we were at eye level. "I'm going to be teaching you a very special form of magic—an ancient and sacred discipline."

"What is it?" He'd genuinely piqued my interest.

"You'll see." He tossed me my pointed wool hat, which was officially part of the uniform, but no one actually wore it, except for a few first years like Colin Creepey. I pushed it into my pocket.

It was very early, but some pale, amber light made it past the windows. The torches in a few of the main halls were lit. We headed out through a small side court. Miles led me up to a flat area where I'd seen kids practice flying under the watchful eye of Madame Pooch. He stopped at a shack along the edge of the makeshift field and rummaged around in it. "No, garbage, that won't do, duff... Here's one. A Street-Sweep. Bet someone left it here."

"Whoa, wait a second." I stood my ground while Miles turned and headed towards the Quiltage pitch. "I'm not ready for this."

"Come along. Can't learn here. You need a proper pitch."

I complained the entire walk, coming up with a long list of reasons why this was a bad idea. Miles ignored me—or rather he seemed mesmerized by the pitch ahead of us—as if it were a beautiful siren beckoning him forward.

"Early forms of Quiltage have been played almost as long as witches have been riding brooms. Its history can be traced back to the ninth century where—"

"Dude, I've never even been on a broom before. There's no way you can teach me to play Quiltage."

Miles laughed as he took his broom out of his leather case. "Obviously, you need to learn to fly a broom properly before I can teach you the sacred art of Quiltage."

"I already told you. I'm not ready for this."

"Don't worry. I'm an excellent instructor. I teach a beginners' class back home... and I brought a vial of Dittany just in case."

"In case of what?"

He tossed me a broom and walked to the center of the field. "Riding a broom is just like riding a motorcycle."

"I've never ridden a motorcycle."

"Neither have I. That's not the point." He held his broom out. "You mount the broom like this."

"This is a bad idea." I held my broom out in front of me.

"Not like that. Like this." He moved my hands to the proper location. "Grip is the single most

important thing for beginners. Now, let's try getting off the ground. All you need to do is push off."

He rose about three feet off the ground and floated perfectly still.

Cautiously, I lifted my feet off the ground and promptly fell. "Ouch!"

"Austin, you have to push off with conviction."

"Well, I think that's about enough for today. Maybe next week—" I turned, and a second later, Miles blocked my path, still only a couple feet off the ground.

"Give it another go."

I did and fell again. And again. After eight or nine tries, I hoped Miles might give up. He didn't. He reached into his leather case and pulled out a length of thick rope. One end he tied to the tip of my broom, the other to the back of his. I could tell from his complex knots that he'd done this before.

"Okay," he said. "Mount it, just the way I showed you, and I'll pull you along."

"Don't go higher than a foot or two."

"I've gotta go high enough to lift your broom off the ground. Hold on." My broom almost ripped out from under me, but I managed to clutch it in my hands.

We must have been twenty or thirty feet off the ground. The cold wind battered my face. "Let's try landing," I cried.

"I'm going to go a little faster. Lean into the turns," Miles hollered.

"I don't think that's a good idea quite yet."

"Here we go."

Both brooms shot forward, and Miles turned as he came to the edge of the pitch. Cautiously, I tried to lean into the turn, but my broom shook, almost as if it bumped against the air. At the other end, he turned even tighter, forcing me to lean well over to the side, but instead of falling to my death, I felt the broom turn under me, smoothly this time.

Miles did three more laps around the pitch, and I realized no matter how much I leaned, the broom responded by turning tighter and keeping me from falling off.

Miles hadn't actually shown me how to stop, but he came in slowly, and I fell lazily to the ground, laughing as I rolled in the wet grass.

"See, it's fun."

"If you're an adrenaline junkie."

"Now, I want you to try lifting off again." He untied the rope from his broom.

"I don't know, Miles."

"Don't talk that way. You've gotta do it with determination." He lifted the end of the rope. "I'll hold on to this end. You'll be fine."

With Miles holding onto the free end of the rope, I felt more confident. So I gave a good kick, and sure enough, my broom rose a few feet off the ground.

"Whoa." I started to fall to the right, but Miles pulled my broom, bringing me back upright.

"It takes balance to stand perfectly still. Like a bike, it's easier if you're moving." Miles pulled me in circles like a kid with a red wagon. "Now, to land, just put your feet out. The broom will take care of the rest."

Carefully, I straightened my legs and started to wobble as the broom descended.

"Not like that. With force."

So I kicked them straight out, and a second later, I stood on the ground.

"Not bad," Miles said. "I've taught six-year-olds with more confidence than you, but it's a start."

"Thanks." I dismounted. "Great first lesson."

"Not so fast, my friend. One more time." He took out his wand, tapped the rope saying, "*Diu extendam*," and like one of those black firework snakes—which I hate—it began to grow from one end. He retied our brooms so my mine could pull his, leaving a good ten or fifteen feet of extra rope in the middle.

"Wait a second. You don't mean—"

"Yep, you're going to pull me." Pulling on the rope, he tested the knot. "Don't worry. I'll talk you through. This is the best way to learn."

Reluctantly, I got back on my broom. Miles helped me get the grip right, and I pushed off. Several feet off the ground, I was going forward at about one mile an hour. "A wee bit faster than that." He pushed my broom, and I darted forward.

Desperate to slow down, I yanked the handle up as if pulling on the reins of a horse.

The broom shot up at an incredible speed.

"Miles!" I screamed as I shot into the air like a fighter jet. I worried there hadn't been enough time for Miles to get on his broom. I glanced back and found Miles holding on to his broom. He wasn't mounted. He hung on to the back of his broom for dear life.

Quickly, I approached the clouds, which were low, but must still have been a hundred feet up. I pulled back harder but didn't slow down. In fact, I was shooting almost straight up, like a rocket.

Miles yelled at me, but through the buffeting sounds of the wind, I couldn't make out a word.

Between the wet grass and the clouds, I was soaked. Freezing air whipped at every bit of exposed skin. I gripped the broom with all my strength and tried to pray, but my mind was as blank as the sky above me.

"Austin." Miles's voice boomed over the wind. I glanced back. He'd managed to get on his broom and sat poking his wand into the side of his neck. "I need you to lean forward."

"I can't," I cried, too afraid to move a muscle.

"Hug your boom handle. Wrap yourself around it."

"I—that's enough practice for today. Pull me down." I closed my eyes so they wouldn't freeze open.

Miles didn't reply right away, and I felt the tug of his broom trying to slow us down. "Fine," he said. "Look down."

I ignored him.

"Do it now." His voice filled my head. "Look down!"

I obeyed, opening my eyes halfway and staring down at the ground below. We were beyond the clouds now, and the castle looked like a miniature model that belonged on display in some museum.

I screamed and hugged the broom like a child clinging to a teddy bear. The broom twisted in the air, almost throwing me off, and began nose-diving towards the ground.

"Great. Now loosen your grip a bit."

"No," I yelled, but realized speeding straight down was probably even worse than speeding

towards the sky. I tried to ease my grip.

"You're going to have to do better than that, mate."

My eyes closed tight. I loosened my grip as much as I dared. I could feel the wind trying to peel me off the broom.

"Good, good, a little more... more... Now, on the count of three, kick your legs out as hard as you can. As hard as you can."

"They'll be crushed to bits." Even with my eyes closed, I sensed the ground rushing towards us.

"Trust me. Kick hard. One. Two. Three. *Kick.*"

I kicked my feet as ordered, and thoughts of my mother popped into my head. The ground hit my feet hard, but not hard enough to break anything. I wasn't falling, but the wind still whipped my face. Opening my eyes was I sliding forward, skiing across the grass. Quickly, I came to a stop and then promptly fell over.

"Austin, are you okay?" Miles crouched at my side. "Anything broke?"

"I hate Quiltage."

"*That* wasn't even close to Quiltage. That wasn't even flying, really."

"Could have gone worse."

"Remember when I told you couldn't be a Muggle?"

"Yep."

"And that since you were in Slipperen, you had to be at least half blood but didn't know it, on account of being from America?"

"Yes."

"I might have been wrong."

*

I'd never studied so hard in my life. I continued working with Hermione once or twice a week as her schedule allowed. She helped me with all my classes, even giving me some pointers about Potions, which I was terrible at. And once I got the hang of casting, the magic came easier, though some of the spells still seemed downright impossible.

I made a few more Slipperen friends too, though the more time I spent with them, the more I felt maybe the Sorting Hat had put me in the wrong house. It was as if once the hat labeled you as a Slipperen, you were marked as a troublemaker, segregated into the dark, damp dungeon, and given Smape, the cruelest teacher, as your counselor. If the kids in Slipperen were all bad, it was because the school expected them to be. Either way, I didn't really fit in.

Still, when they asked me for a favor, I couldn't say no.

Chapter 10 – The Plotter Posse

Several months went by, and I hadn't heard any more strange whispering, except in my dreams. The trees changed colors, and the already cool dungeon grew cold.

As I entered the library, Miles called me over. He was sitting with two other Slipperens who were older than me but who I sometimes hung out with: Adrian Prucy and Perigee Derrick.

"Austin knows Hermione," Miles told them. "They study together all the time."

"It's only once a week or so."

"How do you put up with her?" Perigee asked.

I was about to tell them she was all right, but I didn't get a chance.

"Listen," Adrian said. He was older. Most of the kids in our house looked up to him. "Every October thirty-first, the Weasely twins play a practical joke on Slipperen House. They consider it a Halloween tradition."

"Hermione never talks about them," I said truthfully. "I don't know anything about it."

"But we do." He smirked. "Hestia overheard Ron say they're planning something with the Gryffinbore ghost, Practically Headless Patrick, on Halloween. And get this: they're using a room just down the hall from our common room. It has to be part of their plan."

"And how does this involve me?"

"Ask her about it. See what you can get out of her," Adrian said.

"Okay, but I doubt she'll say much. She doesn't talk about them."

"If you don't find anything out, it's fine," Miles said. "Just ask."

"We know where the room is. So even if you can't get anything out of her, we'll have you stake the room out on Halloween," added Adrian.

"Me?"

"Who else? If they catch you, Hermione will make sure they don't hurt you... much."

"If they catch you," Miles patted me on the back, "just tell them you were looking for Hermione, that you had some question about the fourteen uses for dragon's blood or something like that."

"There're thirteen uses for dragon's blood... I think." I didn't feel as if I could say no. After all, I kinda owed them for letting me into their house, didn't I? "Sure, whatever, I'll do it."

The next time I met Hermione was in the library. I was studying the book she'd given me. In between my constant questions about the wizarding world, she worked on a report.

"So I heard a rumor about the Plotter Posse."

"The Plotter Posse?" She dropped her quill.

"That's what most of the kids in Slipperen call you, Harry, and Ron."

She rolled her eyes. "And what's this rumor?"

"That you guys, led by the notorious brothers-in-crime Weasely, are planning to humiliate the entire Slipperen House on Halloween."

"I don't know anything about that," she said. "But I can't control Fred and George. Trust me, I've tried. They haven't said anything. Maybe I can ask them to take it easy on you guys. The last thing we need is more bad blood between houses."

"Hermione, are you telling me the truth?"

"What? Of course." She looked genuinely wounded. "I wouldn't lie. Why would you say that?"

"My sources say you and Plotter are planning the whole thing."

"Then your *sources* are mistaken." Her cheeks turned a shade of pink, making her freckles stand out.

"I've heard you've booked a classroom near the Slipperen common room on Halloween."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, that. That's just a Death Day party. There's nothing sinister about that."

"A party?"

"Yes."

"Oh, for Gryffinbores only." I made an exaggerated nod. "Just down the hall from the Slipperen common room. I see."

"Austin, it's not for Gryffinbores only. It's a Death Day party for Practically Headless Patrick. It's not a regular party, but you are welcome to come."

"I just might."

"Great, Ron was asking about you."

"Ron wants to meet me? I thought it would be Harry."

"Harry has so much on his mind. I doubt he even remembers there's an American in Slipperen." She looked as though she were considering whether or not she was going to tell me the next part. "Ron has this silly idea that you... that you might like me."

"Me, like you?" I winked. "That's silly. I'm a Slipperen, so I despise you."

"Not like that. You know what I mean."

"Oh, I see... Well, you would make a good catch—a top trophy witch to show off to my Muddle friends."

With that, she jinxed me.

Chapter 11 – Bubbles and the Unbreakable Vow

As Halloween grew closer, the rain and wind drove harder every day. I'd never seen so much rain in my life. Even with our shoes and uniforms being cleaned daily, everyone still walked around with mud caked on their shoes and hems.

Hermione and I didn't talk about the party or the prank until a couple nights before Halloween. I'd stayed in the Great Hall until after dinner, working on a scroll for History of Magic. The Great Hall was a hangout of sorts, especially for Ravenbeaks and Huffalumps, who intermixed more than Slipperen or Gryffinbore houses. Over the weeks, a few girls had come up to me and asked questions

about what part of America I was from (the answer was all over because of my dad's job) and what it was like living there. Mostly, everyone left me alone. Still, I enjoyed sitting with other kids around, and I felt as if I were making some friends, or at least acquaintances, outside of Slipperen.

Anyway, about fifteen minutes after she'd left with Harry and Ron, Hermione walked back in. The Slipperen table was empty except for the Carlow twins and a few of their girlfriends, but they were at the far end of the table.

"Bubbles." Hermione sat across from me.

I tried to figure out what she was talking about. "What is... the only safe thing to smoke in a pipe?"

"No, silly. The prank. Fred and George. They are going to fill the Slipperen common room with bubbles."

"Bubbles?" I was skeptical. "How do they plan to get in? We change the password all the time."

"I have no idea." She glanced down at the Carlow twins, who were staring at us. "But that's not the point. The point is it's completely harmless. It's nothing to worry about, nothing to upset your friends."

"Bubbles. Well, guess so. I don't think most of my fellow Slipperens will enjoy it, but it sounds like it might turn out kinda fun." (It didn't.)

"I've got to run." She stood up. "Have to help Harry and Ron redo reports on the Gargoyle Strike of 1911."

"See you. Oh, and tell Ron I'm going to steal his girlfriend!"

"That's not funny. I'm not anyone's girlfriend, *especially* not Ronald Weasley's." She turned with her hands on her hips.

"Not yet."

She blushed as she turned and left. I didn't have romantic feelings for Hermione, but I loved to make her blush.

I told Miles and Adrian that the prank was just filling our common room with bubbles. They said there was no way a Gryffinbore could get into our common room. There was a protective

enchantment that prevented it—something about turning flesh into scales. They were sure Hermione was just trying to throw me off and wouldn't listen when I told them she wasn't like that.

They insisted that I stake out the party anyway. At least they weren't sending me empty-handed.

"We've got your back." Miles leaned over a table in the common room, speaking in a hushed voice. "First, here's a Slipperen House pendant."

"What's this for?"

"Pin it on your robe. It's enchanted. When you press it, every other Slipperen wearing one will feel it."

I'd seen lots of Slipperens wearing these pendants, mostly the older guys. I felt as if I was being invited into a select sect of the cool Slipperens. "So I just tap it if I see anything."

"Twice. You tap it twice," he said. "We'll know where you're hiding, but even if we didn't, any Slipperen who taps their pendant twice in reply will be able to find you."

"How?"

"Umm, *magic*. It'll guide them, the pendant. It will actually pull in the right direction." He stood up. "And that's not all. We've got an invisibility ring for you."

"Invisibility ring?"

"Yes, to borrow. Except it doesn't make you totally invisible, just hides you in shadows. Remember, you've gotta stick to the shadows."

"So who are we borrowing it from?"

"That's the sucky part. Malfoy. It's his father's ring." He looked over at Malfoy sitting in front of the fireplace.

"Oh, this should be fun."

"Hey, I don't like Malfoy either. But we've gotta suck it up for Slipperen."

"Why do you dislike Malfoy so much? I mean, sure he's a total tool, but most of the kids in Slipperen put up with him."

"It's those damn brooms."

"Brooms?"

"The Cumulus 2001. Malfoy's rich father bought them for everyone on the team but with the condition that he play Seeker."

"Hermione said something about that."

"Bet she didn't tell you that I've wanted to play Seeker for Slipperen since I was a little kid." His face seemed to turn pale, then pink. "I've been the Slipperen Keeper the last two years, and I would have been the Seeker this year if it wasn't for Malfoy and all his money."

"I'm no Quiltage expert, but aren't you a little large for a Seeker?"

"Malfoy's not half the Seeker I am."

The redness in Miles's face seemed to seep into his eyes. I didn't know what to say, so I said the one thing guys can always say when there's nothing else to be said. "Sucks."

Malfoy reclined by the fireplace, on a low couch, pressed lower thanks to his overweight best mates parked on either side of him. He stood up as we approached.

"Hey, Malfoy." Miles stared as if he were looking past him.

"Did you catch the game last week?" Malfoy didn't give Miles a chance to reply. "I totally beat out the Huffalump Seeker. We wouldn't have won if it wasn't for me."

"Yeah, I saw it. I was playing." He glanced at me, almost begging me to take over the conversation. "So do you have it?"

"Have what?" Malfoy crossed his arms.

"You know, the ring." I stepped forward.

"You mean my priceless family heirloom Goblin Shadow Ring that was enchanted by Salazar Slipperen himself?"

"Yes, Malfoy, that's the one," Miles said through gritted teeth.

"How do I know I'll get it back?"

"Because we're Slipperens, and we give you our word," I told him.

"You're going to have to do better than that." Malfoy took out his wand. "You're going to have to make a vow, the Non-breakable Vow."

"Is this really necessary?" Miles said, but Malfoy held up his wand while holding out his other

hand. Miles reached out to take it.

"Not you. Him." He pointed his wand at me.

"Fine." I took his hand.

"Do you promise to return my priceless Shadow Ring upon completion of your quest?"

"My quest?"

"Just say yes." Malfoy tried to stare into my eyes.

"Yes."

Malfoy pointed his wand at our hands, and a jet of plasma shot out, thin, like a hot wire. It burned as it wrapped around our hands. Instinctively, I pulled away. He held tight.

"And do you swear you won't use the ring for any other purpose?"

"Yes." I was still trying to get loose.

He smirked, and I wiggled out of his sweaty grip. He reached in his robes and pulled out the ring, putting it into my hand. He didn't let go until he said, "Guard it with your life."

We couldn't walk away fast enough.

"Guard it with my life, whatever."

"No, he was serious about that." Miles stopped once we were out of earshot and turned towards me. "You made the Non-breakable Vow. If you lose that ring or even use it for anything else, you'll die."

"What do you mean *die*?"

"As in dead. You might get lucky and maybe Dumblesnore could bring you back. I don't think Malfoy did it right. You need a third person to do the bonding, but I imagine if you break your oath, you'll get really messed up."

Chapter 12 – Bubbles of Trouble

On Halloween night, a Slipperen girl named Tracey was assigned to keep an eye on the Gryffinbore common room, wherever that was. She signaled when Plotter and his friends left to go to the

dungeon.

I made my way to the part of the dungeon where the Death Day party was going to be held. Outside, about ten feet from the door, stood a niche with a suit of armor in it. A black candle next to it smoked and cast an eerie blue light that seemed to make the shadows behind the armor darker. Voices told me they had already begun setting up. The door was framed with candles, and cold air rushed from the room, making the entire hallway like a walk-in fridge.

Carefully, I slipped behind the suit. I bumped it once, and it creaked as it elbowed me. Thankfully, no one inside the room heard.

Right after the Halloween feast started, Miles showed up. "Austin, Austin, are you there?" His gaze seemed to go right through me. I'd forgotten about the ring. "I'm here." I waved my arm. "Whoa. That's creepy." He pulled a huge piece of pumpkin pie covered with mounds of whipped cream out from under his robes. "I just came by to bring you something to snack on and to tell you Fred and George are in the Great Hall."

"Then there's no need for me to stay here."

"No, stay put." He eyed the door. "Adrian still thinks they're getting ready for the prank in there. The twins will probably head down soon. Someone will try to follow them when they leave."

"Fine, I'll stay." I should have brought a book with me. Or a jacket.

"Just remember, don't signal until you see what they're up to or until they all leave together."

"Got it."

I leaned against the wall, listening to the eerie music that floated out of the room. After what seemed like hours, someone walked out. I knew I should stay put, but I couldn't. Whether I was afraid of getting caught or of betraying Hermione's trust, I couldn't stay there and spy on them. I quickly walked down the hall.

I heard, almost felt, something behind me. Not students, something else—something dangerous. I started to run. It was no use. A voice boomed clear and loud, "Kill... Murder... Blood... Must have blood."

I ran as if being chased by death itself. The voice almost on top of me. Down an adjacent corridor,

something appeared around a corner. I gasped and jumped back.

Not a monster but a girl, a little girl, stood in the dark corridor. I didn't see her face, only her hands, covered in bright-red blood, as were the front of her robes. She passed me so quickly and disappeared down a hall with such speed, it almost seemed as if she glided over the ground.

I stood there wondering if it had been a student or some sort of spirit until voices came up an adjacent stairway. Close, really close. I dashed up the stairs and peered out around the corner.

There stood the three of them: Harry, Ron, and Hermione. They ran down the hall and up a staircase. I followed far enough away so as not to be seen. I chased them around until they stopped at a first-floor corridor. My end of the hall was draped in shadow, and I approached slowly, so I remained hidden, invisible.

Bright-red writing was splattered all over the wall, and from what looked like a torch holder hung a dead cat. All three of them talked in rushed, urgent voices. A moment later, the hall filled with students. A huge group of kids had apparently left the feast at the same time and now surrounded Harry, Ron, and Hermione. I couldn't believe what bad luck these three had. I mean, what were the odds of a huge mass of students leaving the feast at just the right time to find the Plotter Posse standing under a dead cat?

Malfoy, who was at the front of the mob, shouted, calling Hermione a Muddblood and saying she'd be next.

In another incredibly bad break, Finch arrived seconds later and started crying over his cat. He blamed Harry, who wasn't bright enough to back away before Dumblesnore and several of the teachers arrived—which was probably the first bit of good luck he'd had, as Finch was about to rip Harry's head off.

Dumblesnore calmed Finch down then made us all scatter back to our houses while the teachers took Harry, Ron, and Hermione away for questioning. I almost stepped forward and told Dumblesnore it wasn't them, that I had seen who it was. But if I did, they would have asked me who I'd seen, and I had no idea. They probably would have asked me why I was in that corridor, and I couldn't say. And they might have even asked me if I heard anything else suspicious. No, it wouldn't do

Hermione or anyone else any good if I started telling stories about hearing voices.

In all the commotion, everyone forgot about Fred and George. But when we got to the hall outside of the Slipperen common room, we discovered they'd made good on the bubbles prank—a particular kind of bubbles: swamp bubbles. They hadn't needed to get inside our common room because there was only one hallway leading to it. So they'd cast the most revolting spell imaginable and turned the hallway into a foul, noxious swamp—complete with swamp bubbles that smelled of sulfur and dragon farts, or so I was told, having never had the pleasure of smelling dragon farts firsthand.

There wasn't any way to keep the muck from being tracked into the common room, and even though we took our shoes off, our dormitory still stank so badly we hardly slept. Fred and George were giant gits. A little practical joke was one thing, but they took it way too far.

By morning, Snape had cleared out the swamp, but the smell lingered until the next day, when the elves, working like slave laborers, finally managed to scrub most of the stink away.

I ran into Hermione that afternoon in the halls.

"Austin, wait up."

I didn't even look back.

"Austin, wait," she yelled. "Don't make me jinx you."

Reluctantly, I slowed down, but she still had to run to catch up to me.

"I know you are upset about Fred and George." She tried to catch her breath. "You have to believe me. I had no idea they meant swamp bubbles. They tricked me too."

"Except your bed doesn't smell like ripe frog guts."

"Eww. That's terrible."

"I'll tell you what's terrible: your friends."

"You've got to understand Fred and George. They just don't know where to draw the line. They get carried away."

"It's not just those two idiots. What about Harry? Marching around the halls like he owns the place, yelling at his best friend, even lets demented pixies almost kill that Neville Thongbottom kid, even though he's in Gryffinbore—"

"We did not *let* the Cornish pixies pick up Neville. There were just too many of them. And Harry, well, Harry's under tons of pressure, especially now. I thought we were going to be expelled yesterday. It's been a *really* tough year for Harry."

He wasn't the only one. "Is that why he refused to even shake hands with Malfoy last year?"

"What are you talking about?"

"First year. Everyone says Malfoy put his hand out, and Harry wouldn't shake it."

"Yes, after Malfoy publicly ridiculed Ron's entire family just because they don't have a lot of money. I was there. I remember. You don't know what it's like to be Harry Potter."

"No, I don't. I can only judge him by what I see."

"Fine. Think whatever you want." She started walking away. "Just don't ask me for any more help."

After the swamp bubble gas attack, some of the Slipperens stopped talking to me. They blamed me for not stopping Fred and George. I mean, if I asked them a question, they'd answer, even help out if I was in a bind. But that was the Slipperen code. No matter how much they disliked me, they wouldn't break it.

Miles and a few of my other friends tried to laugh it off, but not Adrian. He was the leader, and he lost a lot of face with the upperclassmen for failing to stop the prank. I felt pretty bad about that.

Obviously, I returned Drano's Shadow Ring straight away. But no one asked for the pendant, so I kept it, though it was kind of a pain. See, the Slipperens had worked out a code based on the number of taps they made on the pendant. Two taps meant Slipperen in trouble. The Slipperen code demanded that everyone respond to that one. It helped explain why whenever a Slipperen was cornered or outnumbered, his housemates would come to his aid almost immediately.

The problem was the other tap codes. Five taps being the most common one. Five taps was a call to arms: practical jokes, chance to get one over on a Gryffinbore, help needed to steal test answers, anything that meant they were up to no good. And someone was almost always up to no good. The pendant was always vibrating with five taps. It was really distracting. I kept taking it off and putting it in my pocket when I didn't want to be disturbed.

The good news was that Hermione didn't get expelled, and neither did Harry or Ron. Even the cat

was lucky. It wasn't actually dead, just petrified. Still, it was the only thing anyone could talk about for weeks—that and the Chamber of Serpents.

I had almost managed to fall asleep in History of Magic. The class was taught by a ghost named Bitts. Most people know that ghosts are cold. But what you may not realize is that they leave a trail of chills, like leaving the freezer door open. Professor Bitts would walk around the room, making the whole place so cold it was hard to sleep. Like I said, I was almost out when Hermione raised her hand. No one ever asked questions in History of Magic, so Bitts went on for several minutes before he saw her.

"Professor, can you please tell us about the Chamber of Serpents?"

At first, he seemed reluctant, but Hermione used her uber brainpower to get him talking. I'd already heard all about the Chamber. Though the story the Slipperens told was a bit different than what Bitts said. It was Miles who'd told me.

"Don't worry about the Chamber of Serpents, mate," he'd said as we sat in our common room late one night.

"That's easy for you to say. You're not a Muddblood."

"Don't say that. Say Muddle-born."

"I'm taking it back—Muddblood."

"That's stupid. Don't say it." He leaned in. "Listen, the Chamber of Serpents was built to protect us."

"Protect us?"

"Yes, protect Slipperens. See, the school was founded by four professors, one from each house. Ours was Salazar Slipperen. Even back then, the other teachers and students hated us. Salazar wanted it to be an elite school, only teaching the brightest and most promising students. He thought that taking in everyone meant no one would have an opportunity to excel, to learn the most advanced magic, and after sitting through a semester of Divination with Treelawnie, I can't disagree with him. The other professors were in it for the power—the more students, the more power. So they conspired to get rid of Salazar."

"Wow, we were hated even back then?"

Miles nodded. "But Slipperen was a genius. He knew eventually he'd be kicked out, and then it would be open season on anyone in Slipperen House. So he built the Chamber of Serpents, saying that he was installing plumbing as a cover story."

"Plumbing?"

"Yeah, this was *way* before indoor plumbing. Hogwarts became the first building since the Romans to have hot running water. But he installed more than just plumbing and sewers. Somewhere in these very dungeons lies the Chamber of Serpents."

"But how does it protect us?" I rummaged through a bag of Bernie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, looking for one that seemed safe.

"Before Salazar left, he put a monster in the Chamber. Some sort of snake, obviously. When they banished him, he warned them about the Chamber and told them that it would open if anyone harmed his students. No one, not even Dumblesnore, knows where the Chamber is. And they're all afraid. That's the only reason they haven't disbanded Slipperen House long ago.

"Wow, and it just opened now?"

"It's been opened before. Anytime the harassment and abuse of Slipperens gets too bad, the Heir of Slipperen can open it."

"Heir of Slipperen?"

"Nobody knows who the Heir of Slipperen is or are. Some think it means anyone from our house, at least anyone who's a true Slipperen at heart. But most believe you have to have some of Salazar's blood in your veins." He leaned back. "Either way, *if* someone's opened it now, until the rest of the school starts treating us with a little respect, everyone who's not a Slipperen is in danger, especially the Muddle-borns."

"Wow, what a story." With my thumbnail, I cut a jellybean that I suspected might be vomit in half and carefully licked the center. Tutti-frutti.

"Yep, but don't tell anyone. Even Dumblesnore doesn't know as much about the Chamber as the students of Slipperen House. To tell would be like treason."

"But wouldn't Smape tell him?"

"Maybe. Smape's loyal to him and all, but I doubt he'd reveal the location of the Chamber. And he doesn't know it."

In the version Bitts told, the monster was put down there for revenge, which didn't make a lot of sense. I mean, if Salazar Slipperen wanted revenge, he would have released the snakes, or monster, or whatever right when he got canned or maybe when he died. He wouldn't have bothered to wait hundreds, no, thousands of years until Slipperen students were under threat from the other houses. Still, Bitts insisted the whole thing was made up.

Most of the Slipperens thought they at least knew why it was opened. There were two main theories. First, Dumbledore caused it to open when he awarded hundreds of extra points *after* the end of last term so that Gryffinbore could steal the House Cup from Slipperen. But a lot of kids thought it had opened after Fred and George's practical joke.

I didn't buy either. First, the House Cup debacle didn't seem that big of a deal. Staff were allowed to assign points, even if they didn't normally assign so many at once. Even if that was the reason, it would have opened before now, say last year, or first thing this year. On the other hand, Fred and George were always orchestrating practical jokes, and this last one happened at precisely the same time as the attack, so the Chamber *had* to be opened before that. Besides, I was sure Slipperens had suffered things worse than swamp gas over the years.

Every night, when I was supposed to be sleeping, I lay in bed with images of the metal door and echoes of the mysterious voice swimming in my head. I didn't want to face it, but I knew they were connected with the attack.

Chapter 13 – The Swelling Scandal

As winter approached, things got downright chilly. Snow and rain found cracks in every window and door. The Slipperen common room, which was damp at the best of times, now took on a permanent moldy smell, and the floors were so wet rugs had to be laid down so students wouldn't slip and fall.

Defense Against the Dark Arts became a total waste of time. The class devolved into nothing more

than a glorified comedy sketch with Luckhart and Harry acting out scenes from one of his books. We didn't actually learn any spells. And while I wanted to believe Hermione's assertion that Harry wasn't the attention-seeking brat that Malfoy claimed, I couldn't figure out why else he'd agree to participate in Luckhart's little performances.

Then Slipperen house lost our first Quiltage match of the year to none other than Gryffinbore—specifically to Harry, who, even though he broke his arm, caught the Snitch, which as far as I could figure automatically won the game. That put everyone from Slipperen in a terrible mood.

I didn't think things could get worse until the incident in Potions.

During Potions, I sat with Miles, Drano, and Goyle. It didn't matter that Miles and I didn't care for Drano. We were Slipperens. Who else could we sit with? We had all worked on our potions together, and every one of us had made a passable batch of Swelling Potion, which was good because I really needed high marks to get my grade up.

Towards the end of class, with our potions waiting to be checked by Smape, Miles told us about this side business he had going.

"I buy the talismans for five sickles a piece and resell them for a galleon each," he whispered.

"What are talismans?" I asked.

"They're protective charms. I found a supplier in the back of *The Quibbler*," Miles said. "I only have to buy a dozen to get wholesale pricing."

"If you found them in *The Quibbler*, they've gotta be rubbish." Malfoy stirred his potion.

"I found the supplier in *The Quibbler*. These are the real thing. They're not powerful," Miles admitted. "But they're real."

"And you're making money at this?" I'd read about, but really didn't know, how currency in the wizarding world worked.

"Heck yeah, I've taken ten galleons off of Neville Thongbottom alone."

"Is that his real—" I glanced over at another table where Smape stood grading the Gryffinbore potions. As he bent down to examine Ron's, Harry threw something across the aisle and into Goyle's cauldron. When it hit the potion, the thing exploded, sending Goyle's Swelling Solution into all of our

faces.

Goyle was the closest, and his entire face swelled up like a giant pumpkin. Drano's nose ballooned larger than Bozo's. But Miles got the worst of it. A huge drop hit him right in the eye. The classroom broke into chaos with students screaming and dashing under desks.

"My eye! My eye!" Miles fell to the floor.

"It's okay," I told him. "Let me look."

"It really stings, mate." He moved his hand, and his eye began to bulge out of his skull like a character in one of those old Saturday morning cartoons.

"Maybe leave it covered." I patted him on the shoulder.

Snape got the class back to order quickly and produced a Deflating Draft. I tried to get Miles in line first, but Drano and Goyle pushed their way in front.

While Snape put drops of the potion in, Miles spread his fingers so his eye wouldn't pop out. "If I find out who did this," Snape's voice sounded soft and so angry, like a whisper about to erupt, "I shall make sure they are expelled."

As he said it, I noticed Hermione tiptoeing out of Snape's supply closet. My anger boiled over. Hermione was obviously in on it—some sort of ruse to steal supplies. I almost ratted on them right then. I didn't care if Harry got expelled. In my book, attacking us for no other reason than that we were Slytherins was cause for expulsion. But even though I wasn't on speaking terms with Hermione, I couldn't get her expelled. As I helped Miles back to his seat, Harry and Ron kept smirking and trying to hold in their laughter. I stared right at them, and I swear Hermione felt my eyes weighing on her.

We all got incompletes for the potion, except Goyle who got top marks, seeing as his potion worked too well. Snape said the rest of us could make it up, but I didn't think my fellow Slytherins would ever do an assignment twice.

Later that evening as we were getting ready for bed, Miles let me have it. "Why didn't you tell?" he asked me as I changed out of my robes.

"What are you talking about?"

"At Potions, I saw you keep looking over at the Plotter Posse." He stepped forward so no one else

could hear, right in close, standing over my head. "I know you saw them do something to Goyle's potion."

"You're imagining things." I took a step back.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not *lying*," I tried to say without looking away. "I'm just not sure who was involved. That's all."

"It's Hermione, isn't it?" His bloodshot eye drilled into me. "I don't know what you see in her."

"I don't see anything," I pleaded. "I don't like her, honest. Not that way. She's helped me with all my classes. She's just nice, really nice."

"So it's okay for them to attack half the class." He turned away from me. "You'll just keep your mouth shut to protect your fuzzy-haired Gryffinbore girlfriend."

"It's not like that."

"I could have lost an eye, you know." He got into bed. "One of these days, you're going to have to choose: Slipperen or Gryffinbore. You can't have it both ways." He yanked his green bed curtains shut.

The next week, after Potions, I asked if I could stay to remake the Swelling Potion. Miles had cooled down, acting as if we hadn't gotten into a major fight. He'd even offered to stay and help, but he wasn't good at Potions either, and I knew he wanted to play Seeker in a scrimmage Quiltage match Slipperen was holding against Ravenbeak.

Everyone left the room except Smape and Hermione. She kept packing and repacking books in her bag. I figured she planned on staying to try and talk to me, and I was ready for her.

Smape locked the supply closet before going to the back of the room and hesitated at the door, starting to turn back around before changing his mind and walking out.

As soon as he did, Hermione's books found their way into her bag, and she came over to my table. "Need any help?"

"Guilty conscience?" I mumbled.

"What?"

"Why would you offer to help me?"

"Ummm... Because we're friends."

"We are not friends."

"Can't we put everything that happened on Halloween behind us?"

"I'm way past that."

"Then what is it now?" Hermione put her hands on her hips, but she bit her lower lip.

"Oh, I don't know." I turned up the heat on my cauldron. "Could it be how you and Harry Potter almost maimed my best friend?"

Hermione hesitated. "What are you talking about?"

"Harry put some sort of bomb in Goyle's cauldron. It almost blinded Miles!"

"I don't think so." Her voice weak. She wasn't a practiced liar.

"Don't deny it." I was almost yelling now. "I saw him do it. And I saw you come out of Snape's supply room." I was on a roll. "And I know Harry and Ron aren't smart enough to come up with a plan like that on their own."

My arms were shaking so bad I could hardly believe how much anger I'd kept bottled up. It took a moment before I noticed the tears in Hermione's eyes. I wanted to reach out and put my hand on her shoulder, even wipe the tears away, but I couldn't.

"Listen, Austin. I'm really, really sorry." She wiped her tears herself. "We *had* to create a diversion. I didn't realize the blast would be so big that so many students would get splashed."

"Oh, you *had* to create a diversion," I said much more softly, "so you could steal from Snape's supply closet."

"Austin, there's a lot more going on with the Chamber of Serpents than anyone knows. Please believe me."

I couldn't argue there, though I wondered what she knew about it. Had she seen the red girl on Halloween?

"I could get you both expelled," I said without anger, just matter-of-factly.

"Yes, you could do that."

"I wouldn't." I didn't have a little sister, but if I did, I thought this would be how I'd talk to her when I was really ticked. "I'm just so disappointed you were part of it. The other Gryffinbores I expect, but you?"

"I didn't realize." She wasn't crying now, but her cheeks were still wet.

"I know." I read the list of ingredients in my book and picked up the ground goldenseal root. "You just don't have any idea what it's like being a Slipperen."

"No, I don't." She walked over to my side of the table. "It's fermented puffer fish eyes *then* goldenseal. The order is really important with advanced potions."

We didn't talk about anything else except how to make the potion. Smape hadn't returned by the time we finished, so I put the mini-cauldron on his desk under a piece of notebook paper I'd scribbled my name on, which probably wasn't needed, as I was the only student who used notebook paper.

"Hermione," I said quickly before she walked out the door. "Thanks."

"Anytime." She stopped. "I mean that. Anytime."

"Sure." I put my books away.

"Are you headed to lunch? Want to walk with me?"

"Might keep me from getting lost." I smiled. "If you are sure you want to be seen with a Slipperen?"

"The school could use more of that sort of thing."

When we got to the Great Hall, we went separate ways, and no one seemed to notice a Gryffinbore and a Slipperen entering the Great Hall together—except maybe Ron Weasley.

I can't tell you how bad I felt after that, not only for making Hermione cry, but for not stepping forward with my info about the Chamber and the red girl covered in blood. I didn't sleep well for days, and nothing seemed to interest me until I saw a notice on the board outside of the Great Hall: "Dueling Club—First Meeting Tonight!"

Chapter 14 – Dueling Dilemma

A huge number of students showed up in the Great Hall for Dueling Club. The tables were gone. An elevated platform stood along one wall, and mats lay everywhere along the floor. The ceiling took on milky shades of black and browns, as if someone splashed a gallon of chocolate milk across the dark sky.

Everyone stood around the platform as Professors Luckhart and Smape took to the stage. Immediately, Luckhart started joking around, which really irritated Smape. By the time they put on a demonstration duel, Smape was so ticked he sent Luckhart flying across the room.

Luckhart got up, dusted himself off, and said, "If I had wanted to block your spell, it would have been only too easy." Everyone laughed at him. I really liked the way he was willing to make fun of himself. My dad once told me, "If you can't make fun of yourself, you've got no business making fun of anyone else." Luckhart was a walking billboard for self-deprecation.

Luckhart's humor just seemed to tick Smape off more, and he wisely moved on from demonstrations to pairing us off. The Gryffinbores tried to pair off with each other, but Smape wasn't having any of that. Miles and I were the last two guys paired off, and we ended up partnered with girls.

"Dude, I can't hit a girl."

"It's a spell, not a punch," Miles replied as we walked over to a mat at the far side of the room.

"Hey, Katie." I looked at the Huffalump girl I was paired with. "My dad wouldn't want me dueling with a girl." The girl partnered with Miles looked up too. "Would you mind terribly if we switched partners?"

"Scared of getting beat by a girl?" she asked.

I looked around to make sure I wouldn't be overheard. "I'd be really embarrassed."

We changed partners, and Miles and I squared off. Luckhart shouted, "Disarm your opponent only. One. Two. Three."

As quick as I could, I shouted, "*Expelloramus*." Miles did the same, and our spells hit both of us almost instantly. I felt a whoosh slap my chest and push me back. A hard zap, like electricity, shot down my arm, but somehow I managed to hold on to my wand. Miles, on the other hand, had flown five feet back and landed on his rear with a loud thud.

"Dude, are you okay?" I ran forward, picked up his wand, and offered him a hand.

"Wow," he said, as I buckled under his weight. "Maybe I need to study with Hermione too."

Everyone had stopped except for two pairs at the other end of the hall. Harry and Malfoy were still going at it. I didn't care if they maimed each other. But Millicent Bulltode, a Slipperen who was almost as wide as she was tall, with arms thicker than her head, had Hermione in a headlock and appeared to be choking her. Hermione sounded like a drowning puppy.

I started to dash towards her when I saw Miles, his eyes glued on me, watching to see what I would do, which house would I choose: Slipperen or Gryffinbore. I hesitated, and in that split second, Harry pulled Millicent off of Hermione.

I wouldn't have to choose sides, I told myself, at least not today.

Half the kids were still lying on the ground. It seemed no one had followed Luckhart's disarm-only instructions.

"Oh dear," Luckhart said as he and Smape helped students up and performed counter curses as needed. "I think it might be wise to teach you how to block spells. Let's have two volunteers."

Smape made sure it was Malfoy and Harry who went up on stage.

"Okay, Harry." Luckhart smiled. "When Drano casts his spell, block it like this."

Luckhart started twirling his wand around as if he was the conductor in a marching band, finally sending it flying out of his hand. *How did he think this stuff up?*

Everyone laughed. The man was a born comedian. But I felt sorry for Harry because they started the duel, and Harry was left with no idea how to defend himself.

The whole group stood around the platform now. Drano cried, "*Serpentsortia!*" Huge sparks erupted from his wand, morphing into a large black snake, which rose up, ready to strike.

All the girls—and maybe me—screamed. Everyone jumped back.

Smape and Luckhart argued over who was going get rid of the snake. "Someone do something," I shouted from the back of the room.

Luckhart, probably trying to be funny, sent the snake flying into the air. It landed in front of a kid from Huffalump, who I found out later was named Justin.

Harry stepped forward and shouted at the snake. "Leave him be. Stop!" Which was so stupid. It's not like snakes understand English. Except maybe this one—the snake, inches away from Justin's face, stopped and stood perfectly still, then a moment later turned to look at Harry right as Snape zapped it into a huge puff of smoke.

Justin went red, yelling at Harry, though I wasn't sure why. Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran off. After a few minutes of commotion, Snape shut everyone up, showed us the correct way to block a spell, and we went back to practicing.

"What was all that about?" I asked Miles once we were back to our own mat.

"I don't know. Who would have guessed? Harry Potter, of all people, a parselmouth?"

"A what?" I sent a spell his way.

"Parselmouth." He blocked it. "It means he can talk to snakes. That's what all the *sha-show-she* stuff was about."

"I must have missed it," I said as his stunning spell knocked me to the mat.

Later that night in the common room, all anyone talked about was Harry Potter speaking Parseltongue. I still didn't know what they were talking about. I hadn't heard him say anything except telling the snake to stop. Of course I hadn't exactly been standing front and center.

A couple of the kids had dead relatives who'd spoken Parseltongue. Apparently only Slitherens—ones related to Salazar himself—were supposed to be parselmouths. The jealousy was spread thicker than jam.

I didn't realize until the next morning that the rest of the school thought Harry's ability to converse with serpents meant he was not only the Heir of Slitheren, but also that he'd opened the Chamber of Serpents himself.

And a couple days later, Harry was caught actually standing over the frozen bodies of Justin and the Gryffindor ghost—both petrified. Even I had a hard time believing it was a coincidence. If it was, he had the worst luck of any kid ever.

Hermione swore to me that it couldn't be him because he was talking to Hagrid when it happened, and if I didn't believe her, I could ask him myself. Even if I'd had the guts to speak to

Haggard, I doubted I'd understood what he said. Apparently Dumblesnore believed Harry's innocence because, to everyone's surprise, Harry wasn't expelled and continued to run around the school unchaperoned.

Speaking of Hermione, she hadn't been helping me study much—said she was too busy with a special project. I knew she was up to something because I'd seen her go into an out-of-order girls' restroom on the first floor several times. I wanted to go in and see what she was up to, but I wasn't about to go into a girls' restroom, even if it was out of order.

We did occasionally talk in the halls.

"Hey, Austin." Hermione, as usual, was loaded with so many books I thought they might leap out of her arms any second. "Are you lost?"

"Not if this stairway leads to Professor Flichwick's Charms class?"

"Yeah, though it's simpler to take the north staircase. It doesn't normally move."

"Cool, I'll have to try that."

"Have you decided if you're staying over Christmas break?"

"Yeah." I threaded my way through a group of older Huffalumps. "Smape says I have to if I want to have any chance of catching up with the rest of the second years."

"I'll be able to help you over Christmas break." I lost her in the crowd for a few seconds. "There's just one important project I have to finish."

"Don't tell me it involves Harry, Ron, and an out-of-order bathroom."

Hermione stopped, sending several first years plowing into her. "Oh, sorry."

Even with hands full of books, she managed to snag a fistful of my robes and pull me in. "Where did you hear that?"

"I didn't *hear* it." I pulled away. "That bathroom's across from the Great Hall. Didn't you think people might see you coming and going?"

"You didn't tell anyone else, did you? No one else can know about this, please."

"Of course I didn't tell anyone. But I'm sure others have noticed. They're just too scared to say anything. They don't want the Heir of Slipperen to attack 'em."

"That's not funny." We started moving again. "But Austin, we have to keep this a secret. I'm trying to clear Harry's name."

"Don't worry about me, but you might want to consider finding a different path to your secret hideout."

"Thanks." She tucked her head under a sea of robes, disappearing behind a wall of kids. Must be convenient to be small.

Moments later, my shoulder was tapped from behind. "Hermione?" I turned around.

"As if." Hannah Albot stood behind me. "Austin Winters, you'll stop hanging around that girl if you know what's good for you."

I knew what this was about, but I was so irritated with everyone thinking Harry was some sort of homicidal maniac—even though he seemed a tad self-centered—that I had to egg her on. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, her best friend is the Heir of Slipperen, of course."

"Harry Plotter, the Heir of Slipperen?"

"I didn't believe it at first either, but he was caught standing over poor Justin's body."

"He's got bad timing, I'll give you that, but his best friend is Muggle-born."

"But what if he's just using her? I heard she writes both his and Ron's essays."

"I tell you what. I'll believe Harry Plotter is the Heir of Slipperen when the rest of the Slipperens start buying it."

"Yeah, because Slipperens are known for their astute intellect and sound judgment."

"Hey, I am in Slipperen House. Besides, Hermione would know if something was up with Harry."

"You're just too trusting, Austin, or is it..." She put her hand over her mouth. "Don't tell me you're into her. Are you?"

"What? No, not like that." I waved my hand like I was shooing a fly. "She's super nice and really smart, but she's not my type."

"Oh good. You can do *way* better than her." She started walking away. "Be careful, Austin."

That night, I sat studying in our corner of the common room with Miles while he kicked back,

counting his profits from the sale of dodgy talismans and not smoking a lit cigarette, when one of the Carlow sisters came up to us. The fire was low, casting dark shadows, and I didn't realize it was Flora until she spoke. "Put that out, Miles. Secondhand smoke kills."

"If only I was so lucky," Miles said dryly.

"Excuse me?" Her eyes got large and round.

"Not you, Flora. I didn't mean you."

Ignoring Miles, she turned to me. "Here you go." She handed me a note. "Looks like the school's finally on to you, Heir of Slipperen." She laughed and walked away.

"Heir of Slipperen?" I turned to Miles. "What's up with that? I'm the last person who'd be the Heir of Slipperen. I'm a Muddblood."

"Don't say that. You sound like my father when you say that word, and it makes me want to pee in your potion." He'd finished counting his coins but hadn't looked up.

"Miles, what's up?" I read the note. "There's something you're not telling me."

"Okay, but don't jinx the messenger." He put his feet down and sat forward in his chair. "A bunch of the guys were talking about how Harry could never be the Heir of Slipperen, and so they figured it has to be someone from our house."

"So what?"

"So remember how everyone treated you when you first got here? There're never Muddle-born students in Slipperen, *never*. That's why a lot of guys were really standoffish towards you."

"They still are."

"Not as many though." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "See, the thing is, we really don't know if you're Muddle-born. I mean your mom could have been a witch. Your dad could be a Squid. In America, they've lost track of that sort of thing with the witch hunts and all."

"What's do you mean a Squid?"

"Someone with magic blood who can't do magic."

"That would suck."

"Point is, you could easily be three-quarters or more and no one would know. You could even,

possibly, be the Heir of Slipperen."

"Dude, no way. Why would you say that?"

"Not me. I'm with you. I told them no way is Austin Winters the Heir of Slipperen." He put both his hands up as if to surrender. "You're not nearly clever enough, mate. But don't stress. If you do turn out to be the Heir of Slipperen, everyone will love you."

"Except everyone who isn't in Slipperen..." I showed him the note. "Including Dumblesnore."

"Whoa, that's the second time you've been called to Dumblesnore's office this year. I don't know of a single Slipperen who's even been once—except a couple kids who got expelled."

"Should I pack my bags?"

"I doubt he thinks you're the heir." He started coughing and put this cigarette out on the table.

"Uck, filter... Maybe he just wants to test your magic again, make sure you're keeping up."

Chapter 15 – Secret Favors

I took the long way to Dumblesnore's office. I needed some time to think. Not a lot went on without him knowing, and I was sure he was going to ask me some tough questions. I decided I'd have to tell him everything I knew, but I wouldn't mention any of the stuff I wasn't really sure of.

It was a good twenty minutes before I found my way to the stone gargoyle outside Dumblesnore's office.

Inside, Dumblesnore's office seemed darker. He wasn't there, so I walked around his desk to where the Sorting Hat rested.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hat. Are you there?" I whispered, a little embarrassed to be talking to a hat.

"Am I there? Can't you see me?" Hearing a hat speak still freaked me out a bit.

"Oh, sorry. I just wanted to ask you... ask you about my house."

"Oh, not this again."

"It's just, I'm a Muddblo—I mean Muddle-born—and you put me in Slipperen."

"You say you are Muddle-born, do you? Regardless, I stand by what I said. You'll do well in

Slipperen."

The way the hat said it made me wonder if it knew something about my blood status that I didn't. I was going to question it further when a voice came from behind me. "Ah, admiring our enchanted friend?"

I turned to see Dumblesnore right behind me. Standing over me like that, he seemed a lot more intimidating.

"You wouldn't be the first student to put the Sorting Hat back on, hoping for a different answer."

"No, it's just..." I didn't know what to say. "Your bird, did it have a baby?" I pointed to the stand on the side of his desk. The huge intimidating bird was gone, and in its place sat a small chick, maybe four inches tall, just starting to grow feathers.

"No, no. He's the same bird. Flawkes is a phoenix. He regenerates every few months. Born from the ashes, as it were." Dumblesnore reached into a jar on the shelf behind his desk and took out a huge slug, which the little bird gulped down and then let out a squawk much too loud for its size.

"It eats slugs?"

"Only until he's large enough to fly. Then he'll find his own meals. Of course I'll still give him a tasty slug a couple times a week as a treat. They're getting hard to find, you know, since we've been using flesh-eating slug repellant on the mandrakes."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say.

"Have a seat there, my lad, please." He reached into his desk and took out a handful of candy.

"Care for a sherbet lemon?"

"In America, they're lemon drops," I said. He held them in the same hand as he had the slug. "Um, no thanks."

"You must be wondering why I have asked you to my office again," he said while sucking on the lemon drop.

"Yes."

He worked on the candy like a little kid for a minute before speaking. "I've called you here to ask you for a favor."

"A favor from me?"

"Yes, and I must also request that you keep this favor between us—at least for the time being."

This was beginning to sound like the after-school special the school made us watch in the fifth grade. I sat silently and scratched my cheek.

"I need you to take down the protective jinx around Slipperen House."

"Excuse me?"

"And put up another in its place."

"You mean so no one will notice the real one's been removed?" I tried staring him in the eye, wondering what his angle was. Could this be a test? "Like Professor Snape. This is a secret from Snape."

"Only for now. I will, of course, tell your head of house in due time."

"What is this about?"

"I may be able to tell you that as well... in time."

"I can't betray my house."

"I would never ask you to do that. Your house will still be protected, not only with your house password, but also with my new jinx." He pulled out a scrap of parchment. "It's all right here."

I didn't know what to say. He sat patiently and waited while he finished his candy. "I take it from your silence that you will not help me in this matter?"

"No, I didn't say that. It's just..."

"You're still worried about betraying your house, correct?"

I nodded.

"You have the loyalty of a Huffalump. I can give you my personal assurance that this will not in any way betray your house or Professor Snape. Furthermore, I promise you that if I could tell the professor, he would, perhaps with some irritation, give his consent."

Did Snape do anything without irritation?

I knew that everyone in the school, even in Slipperen House, thought Dumbledore was the ultimate wizard superhero, but I wasn't sure. Could I really trust him?

I beat my knuckles against the edge of his desk. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Thank you." Flawkes squawked and hopped on his perch as if working up the courage to fly. "I know, as a former outsider to the wizarding world, this request requires an enormous level of trust." He handed me the parchment.

"This is it?" The top spell seemed normal, but the bottom read more like a child's limerick.

"The first spell removes the charm. The second, a spell of my own creation, replaces it."

"I see." I folded and pocketed the paper, then stood up. "So if that's it... "

"Yes, that's it," Dumblesnore said. "Unless there is anything else you wish to tell me."

I looked across the office at the door, then I sat back down. Dumblesnore didn't say anything, just smiled and peered into my eyes.

"It's about the Chamber of Serpents." I looked down. "I should have come forward sooner, but..."

"Better late than never."

"It's just... I saw a girl. I would have said something if Harry was going to get expelled, but he didn't. And there's more too. There's been voices, well, one voice."

Dumblesnore leaned forward, suddenly very interested. "Austin, it is most important you tell me everything you know. Lives may very well depend on it."

"Okay, the day Finch's cat was attacked and the bloody message appeared on the wall... Just before it happened, I saw a girl running away."

"A girl?"

"Yes, covered in blood. But I don't know who it was."

"Can you describe this girl?"

"No, I didn't see anything except red... wait, red. She was red. Her hair, it was almost as red as her hands, but it wasn't blood, just the color of her hair."

"This is very important. Was she holding anything in her hands?" Dumblesnore stroked his beard.

"I think so, but there was so much blood. I don't know what it was."

"And you mentioned a voice."

"Yes." I *really* didn't want to talk about this part. "I heard it before each attack. It was weird. It

seemed to come from inside the walls, and it carried, as if from far away."

"Could you understand what it said?"

"Yes." I looked at my hands.

"And?"

"Bad things, evil things... Kill, murder, stuff like that."

"I see." Dumblesnore wrung his hands. "And you've only heard this voice right before each of the attacks."

Except for that time in the dungeon, when I may have opened a door for it. "Yep."

"Thank you very much, Austin. I know it took courage to come forward with this. You have no idea how important this information may prove. Is there anything else you can remember?"

"No, sir." I stood up.

He stood too and offered his hand. "If you see, or hear, or think of anything else, my office is always open."

"Yes, sir." I rushed out.

As soon as I got back, I knew Miles would ask what Dumblesnore wanted. I couldn't tell him about replacing the protective spell or about the Chamber, but I had to tell him something, and I didn't want to lie.

I waited outside the door to the common room until after lights out, then silently made my way to bed. As soon as I pulled the curtains, Miles slipped onto the edge of my bed.

"So?" he whispered. "What did he want?"

"He asked about the Chamber of Serpents." I scooted away so the bed didn't tip over from his weight.

"No? Seriously?" He lowered his voice more and bent low so he could whisper into my ear. "Does he think you're the Heir of Slipperen?"

I let out half a laugh. "No, he just wanted to know if I had any more information."

"What did you say?" My night vision had adjusted just enough to make out his eyes, like a pair of floating planets in a starless sky.

"Just that I saw some girl running right before the first attack, the one on the cat, so I knew it couldn't have been Harry."

"You never told me that."

"I didn't?" I thought quickly. "Thought I did. Must have been distracted with the swamp gas attack. You knew I was spying on them. I just forgot to tell you about the girl."

"No, you didn't say a word." He got off my bed. "I was half convinced Harry was guilty."

The next morning, it snowed hard, and almost all the kids left for Christmas break. In Slipperen House, Drano, Crabbe, and Goyle were the only other guys to stay behind, which meant I'd have to at least pretend to like them. Miles said he hated going home, but with everyone gone, he felt the holidays were the perfect time for the house-elves to revolt and take over the school. He gave me a Christmas present before he left and told me I could open it whenever I wanted. And he made me swear to send an owl if anything else happened at the school.

I gave him my gift, all the packs of Big League Chew I'd brought with me from America with a note telling him blowing bubbles might tick his parents off even more than smoking cigarettes.

I decided my best chance to change the protective charm on our common room would be that first night. I waited until Malfoy and his cronies left for dinner and took out the parchment with the spells on it.

I'd done a bunch of protective charms in class, but we hadn't covered the counter charms yet. I figured it couldn't be any different from any other spell.

"*Tabscet pra*"—the room fell dark—"esidio." A great wind howled through the room like a tornado in a bottle. Startled, I put down my wand. A moment later, the wind scattered, and the light returned.

I tried again. "*Tabscet praesidio*." The same as last time, I found myself in the dark, winds swirling around me. I didn't stop though. I finished the spell. "*Supra*." A white mist rose from my wand, calming the winds as it spread, restoring the light. A moment later, everything was back to normal.

"Okay, that wasn't at all freaky."

I looked at the second spell. I couldn't imagine it was real. I'd seen some long spells before, but

most were spells for kids, not serious or powerful incantations.

I figured Dumblesnore knew what he was doing, so I started to recite it. "Plague of scales protect here well, except from those whose potions veil." I didn't know what to expect or if anything would happen. A chill rose up from my feet, sending goose bumps crawling up my legs, my back, then sending my hair on end before settling like a mist over the room. The spell must have worked. And the room somehow seemed different to me, not in any way I could explain, just different.

On my way to the bathroom, I saw Hannah. "Austin, I heard a nasty rumor."

"Seems to be a lot of that going around."

"It's about Miles." She glowered at me.

"Miles?"

"Someone saw him smoking—a cigarette!"

"Oh, yes. He does it to tick his parents off."

She shook her head. "All that work for nothing."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, but she'd already disappeared down a hallway.

I think I got along with Hermione so well because she was the one girl who didn't totally confuse me. Good to her word, she met with me nightly, usually in the library. I'd got caught up on Charms and Transfiguration, but was way behind in History of Magic and Potions. Snape accepted reports or demonstrations for most of my make-up classes but decided to make me take the final for History of Magic. He said I only had one shot, or I'd have to take it next year, along with the new first years. Fortunately, Hermione had gotten a perfect score on last year's test, and due to her oversized brain, remembered almost every question. The hard part was getting her to tell me exactly what the questions were, which she said would be cheating.

I figured out pretty quick that the questions she quizzed me on were the same questions from the real test. So I read what she assigned me as quickly as possible, then I bombed her quiz and memorized the answers after she corrected it.

"Austin, you got three questions right." She handed me my quiz back.

"Not bad."

"Out of twenty."

"Don't worry. I'll review the ones I missed right now."

"You need to pay more attention while you read. You don't get extra credit for finishing quickly."

"I'll do that next time," I mumbled as I tried committing the correct answers to memory.

"It must get boring in the Slipperen common room, what with almost everyone gone." She scratched her neck with the eraser on her pencil. All homework had to be done by quill, but like me, when no one was around, Hermione preferred to jot down her notes in pencil. "Well, except for Malfoy."

"He's not around much, and when he is Crabbe and Goyle are usually with him."

"Usually?"

"Malfoy goes to the common room right after dinner. Crabbe and Goyle keep eating long after everyone else has finished. I think he waits for them there. I don't want to talk to him, so I stay in my dorm until they're gone."

"Right after dinner, you say?"

"Yeah, *why*?"

"Austin." She turned very serious. "I want to ask a favor."

At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I now realize that when someone says they want to ask you for a favor, what they actually mean is that they want to ask you for something that they're pretty sure you won't like.

"Shoot."

"Well, it's sorta top secret."

"You can trust me."

"Oh, I know I can. It's just this is the sort of secret I can't tell you, even though I trust you. I just can't have you involved, understand?"

Now I had an idea of the type of secret it was. "Seems to be a lot of this going around. What is it?"

"You can't even tell anyone I asked."

"Fine, I swear I won't tell—unless they torture me or something, then I'll probably roll right over

on you."

"You know how a few of the Slipperen girls stayed behind this year?"

"Out with it Hermione."

"I need you to get me a girl's Slipperen robe."

"What? You need robes?"

"Preferably one of Millicent Bulltode's. And soon, before Christmas."

"Is this part of your plan to clear Harry? Because I don't think Dumblesnore—"

"I already told you. I can't say." Even though the library was vacant, she glanced about making sure we were alone. "But we aren't doing anything bad to Slipperen."

"Last time you said that, my dorm room ended up smelling like backed-up sewer."

"This time that won't happen. I'll even be there myself."

"You'll be there..." Wait a second. The spell. Dumblesnore. Could it be Dumblesnore knew what Hermione was up to? Knew that her plan was going to fail, but he wanted her to succeed? Maybe it had something to do with the Chamber? Maybe Millicent was the Heir of Slipperen. No, even if she wore a red wig, Millicent was way bigger than the girl I'd seen. Still, I knew this had to be connected.

"Austin, hello, are you there?"

"What? Oh yeah, the robes. I can't help. Millicent's gone."

"She is?" Hermione looked alarmed. "I thought she was staying over the holidays."

"I don't know. She decided to go at the last minute or something." I thought about it for moment.

"You know, there are a few robes hanging around the common room. I might find something for you."

"It would have to be large."

"Yep, I got it."

"Okay, so you'll get the robes?"

"If you promise you aren't going to do anything I wouldn't approve of."

"Well... it's the noblest cause, honest."

"I guess that will have to do."

"Oh, thanks, Austin. I could almost hug you."

"No, please don't. It might cause a scandal."

Chapter 16 – Christmas Streaking

"Get out of here." Millicent's cat had stayed behind and now seemed to think it owned the chair she always sat in. I had to push it off the seat to get it out of the way.

A large set of robes sat right on the back of the chair with a light coating of cat hair covering the shoulders. The robes had to be Millicent's. I made sure no was around and took them to my room.

The next morning at breakfast, I made sure I caught Hermione's eye a couple times until she nodded. When Harry and Ron got up, I heard her tell them she was going to wait around for the *Prophet Post* to arrive.

"You got it?" she whispered, spying down the table at Crabbe and Goyle, who appeared to be neck and neck in a donut-eating contest.

"Yep." I handed her the robes covered in makeshift wrappings of parchment and Spellotape.

She opened one corner. "It's covered in hair. Disgusting."

"It's cat hair. Her cat had been using it as a cushion." I shook my head. "Sorry. My thievery services don't include dry cleaning."

She looked irritated but gave me a sarcastic smirk before stomping out of the Great Hall without a word.

"Geez, Austin, that's awfully nice of you to betray your own house for me," I said in a mock Hermione voice. "You're very welcome. Thanks for acknowledging my loyalty to you and Harry, who I've never met but seems something of a tosser."

Crabbe and Goyle stopped eating midbite with donut pieces sticking out of their mouths and stared at me as if I'd gone completely insane.

I got up and left.

I spent most of my time over the holiday studying, although not all of it was on the curriculum. I'd

opened Miles's present early: an old spell book entitled, *101 Spells Your Parents Don't Want You to Know*. Most of them were pretty useless, like *Minor Sister Silentium*.

Some were long, like the one to turn water into rum. But a few seemed promising, like *Longo Nasum Capillum*, which caused a person's nose hair to grow at a feverish rate. That one was interesting because the book said the nose hair grew slowly at first, and if performed properly the victim wouldn't realize they'd been cursed for about an hour, when their nose hair reached their upper lip.

Haggard arranged a trip to Hogsmeade. Unlike the other visits, even first and second years were allowed to go. Everyone staying over Christmas break went except Harry, which seemed suspicious. Anyway, I wasn't going to ask Hermione about it, not with Ron following her around like a stalker.

I got my dad a box of chocolates at Honeydukes with a bit of wizarding money I won playing Snap, and I sent them via owl. Miles taught me a trick with the mail: address and stamp the letters or packages like normal, but write "GPO" on the back side, and the owls somehow knew that meant to get it to the Royal Post Office. Incoming letters somehow always made it to me as well, though they took the better part of a week. I suspect there were witches or wizards posing as postal workers.

Christmas morning came, and I didn't wake up until the fire had gone cold, and a chill settled upon my room. I was surprised to see a small pile of presents at the foot of my bed.

I opened the biggest first, from my dad: a Cumulus 2001 broom. Wow, what a nice gift—but from my dad? He didn't even know I was training to become a wizard, and where did he ever find a Cumulus broom? It's not as if they sold them at Harrod's of London. There was a small note with it, but it didn't say anything about wizards or flying broomsticks, just that he missed me and Merry Christmas and all that.

The second was a book, *Hogwarts: A History*, from Hermione, obviously. I hadn't gotten her anything. Oops.

There was a mound of something that I think was supposed to be edible, but looked like coal. It included a card that jingled when you opened it. I recognized the scribbles as Haggard's signature. That was nice of him, seeing how we didn't really know each other.

Last was an odd green tubular present that said it was from the faculty. It exploded as I opened it, and three snakeheads popped and out and proceeded to sing "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen." Well, it was the thought that counted.

Inside the tube was a paper hat. Every time I tilted my head it went, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Maybe it was because I hadn't gone to church, but it didn't feel much like Christmas. Still, I wore the hat anyway.

I felt bad. So many people gave me Christmas gifts, and my dad and Miles were the only ones I'd given one to in return. There wasn't any way to buy cards, so I decided I'd just write thank you notes.

I could draw decent when I put my mind to it, so I drew cards with Christmas trees on the front and thank you messages inside. I spent most of the day on them.

I'd missed lunch, so by the time dinner rolled around, I was starving. I took the cards with me. I'd decided to give Haggard his card after dinner. I planned on only giving Hermione hers if her sidekicks weren't around. I didn't want to embarrass her.

As I expected, Hermione arrived at the Great Hall flanked by Ron and Harry. I waved and smiled at her. She waved back and even yelled, "Happy Christmas," but she looked preoccupied.

The school went all out for special meals—but none more so than Christmas. There were no less than three types of birds, six different pies, and at least four types of what passed for pudding in England. The tables were piled high with entrées for little more than a few dozen students.

We'd barely finished eating when Headmaster Dumblesnore started leading everyone in Christmas carols—which I found slightly weird, as there were not that many of us. I thought he'd been drinking. Hermione grabbed Harry and Ron and ushered them out of the hall after the first song.

I kept waiting for a break in the music so I could give Haggard his thank-you card, but even though some of the students had left, Dumblesnore kept on singing, and the staff kept on drinking. None looked more inebriated than Haggard, and I decided it might not be safe to give him his card then. He looked so jolly I thought he might try to hug me, and that'd be the end of me for sure.

After a few more rounds of songs, I figured I could leave without being noticed. I was surprised to find Harry and Ron standing right outside the doors. They each had a big, rich-looking chocolate cake.

Even though Harry smiled at me, they both turned their backs and hid the cakes as if they thought I might try to steal them. How stupid. I was stuffed. I didn't want their dumb cakes.

I made my way to the dungeon and cringed when I had to say the new password: *pureblood*. Who'd let Malfoy pick the password anyway?

It wasn't late, and I owed Snape a Draught of Patience. It was an easy potion, except that it had to simmer and be stirred continually for nearly four hours. If I started right away, I could finish it before bed.

Rather than sitting in Snape's smelly Potions class, I carried my cauldron and burner into the common room and sat in my usual corner. As I laid everything out, I noticed the magic beginning to wear off my Christmas hat. It now sounded like a desperate, "O, oh... oh."

While I stirred the potion, I read a book called *Goony Godric* from one of the shelves in the common room. It was more of a graphic novel. Each page had a few words and an animated cartoon that would play for a few seconds then repeat like a video on a loop. All the stories were the same. Goony Godric—whoever he was—would run into some sort of dangerous situation and almost get killed, except in the end, his trusty sword would save him, often in spite of his fumbling. The book was pretty lame, but I liked watching the animations unfold.

I was so focused on making sure my potion didn't scorch that I hardly noticed when Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy walked in until they started arguing about something. I think it was who was worse, Dumblesnore or Harry. It looked like Malfoy cursed Crabbe because as he and Goyle ran off, his hair started turning red.

My arms began to go numb from the constant stirring. Finally, when it was nice and thick, I stoppered a vial, took it down the hall, and left it on Snape's desk. As I was leaving, Crabbe and Goyle ran by. The strange thing was they wore their underwear and socks and nothing else!

I was glad I didn't hang around with those guys.

Chapter 17 – Tall Tails

The next day, I didn't see Hermione at breakfast to give her my thank-you card. Now I felt sort of weird giving Haggard one, so I put his on his plate before he arrived.

Ron and Harry hadn't shown up for breakfast either, so I went over to the Huffalump table, where a Gryffinbore girl was having breakfast with friends.

"Umm, excuse me," I said to her.

The three of them stopped talking and looked up but didn't say anything.

"Do you know where I might find Hermione Danger?"

She hesitated as if she wasn't sure she was going to reply then said, "Oh my gosh, haven't you heard? I thought everyone knew. She got herself turned into a cat last night."

"A cat? Like a real cat?"

"She has a tail and everything." At this all three of them laughed.

"So I guess she won't be coming out of her room for a while then." I took the card out, figuring she'd be able to give it to Hermione.

"Oh no. She's in the hospital wing." They all giggled again. "She won't be out for weeks."

This, I had to see.

Madam Pomfrey sat at her desk just inside the hospital wing.

"I'm here to see Hermione Danger," I said.

"I won't put up with students gawking at Miss Danger, even if she did bring it on herself." She waved her hand, dismissing me. "Run along."

"But I'm her friend."

"*You* are friends with Miss Danger?"

"Honest. She's been tutoring me." Then I added, "There's nothing wrong with being friends with a Slipperen."

She huffed and pointed towards Hermione's bed without a word.

The curtains were drawn, and I must admit, I was so excited to see what she looked like, my toes tingled. I wasn't disappointed.

"Hermione?"

"Austin, what are you doing here?" She turned away. "Don't look at me."

"Oh, it's not that bad. You make a pretty kitty. I heard you've even got a tail?"

"Stop that. It's not funny. I look dreadful." She was the same size as always and had hands and feet and all, but everything else was catlike. Short, shiny dark hair covered every inch of her, and she even had a little pink cat nose.

"Seriously, it's not that bad," I insisted. "How long until they fix you up?"

"At least a week. Maybe two."

"You'll be back to normal before the start of term."

"Thank goodness. Are you disappointed the whole school won't be able to gawk at me?"

"No, no. Just Miles. He'll never believe me. I mean, he'll believe you sprouted hair like a cat, but the ears and nose and everything..."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"So about that tail?" I resisted the urge to look under the covers.

"Did you come here so you could give me as horrible a time as possible, or what?"

"Actually, I brought you a thank-you card for your Christmas present." I handed her the card.

"That's nice." Her voice was slightly less irritated. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know. I'm the kind of guy who's so nice he'd never tell anyone if you showed him your tail."

"Knock it off."

"Fine. Seriously, how'd this happen?"

It was her turn to change the subject. "It's a really nice drawing." She held up my card.

"Did it have anything to do with what you guys were doing in that bathroom?"

"I didn't realize you were so artistic."

"Don't change the subject. How'd it happen? I bet it's connected with the Slipperen robe I pilfered for you." I pointed at her, sure I was right.

She didn't say a word.

"Hermione, I'm not leaving until you talk."

"Okay, then." Her shoulders dropped. "If you promise not to tell anyone, you can see the tail."

Hermione got out of telling me what had happened, but at least I got to see her tail, just the tip of it. It was so crazy, like she could have been hiding a leopard under her.

Stuck in the hospital, Hermione couldn't help me study for the History of Magic test, but it didn't matter. We'd covered most of the important stuff. I passed the test with an eighty-two percent, which was great as far as I was concerned. Hermione didn't agree.

"I can't believe you," she said as I sat next to her bed. "I invest all this time tutoring you, and then you just go and take the test without reading the rest of the book."

"Hey, I must have got an A-plus on all the parts you taught me."

"That's not the point."

"You almost look normal. When are you getting out of here?"

"Any day now."

"Why don't you just shave it?"

"Grows back within minutes."

"It's not a bad look. You've kinda got the evil villain goatee thing going."

"Very funny." Hermione rolled her eyes. "If you can't keep your wisecracks to yourself, then maybe you shouldn't visit."

"I try," I told her. "It's hard when you can grow a fuller beard than me."

"Austin!" she yelled. "It's just fuzz. The last of it should be gone really soon."

"And they are absolutely sure there's no chance that the tail will spontaneously regenerate?"

She hit me with her spare pillow.

Hermione barely got out of the hospital before term started. But I swear for a good week, she had more arm hair than normal. I still had several classes to make up, so she agreed to work with me once a week or so. She spent so much effort trying to figure out who'd opened the Chamber of Serpents that she didn't have time for much else.

Miles came back popping bubbles larger than his head. "How'd you get them so big?"

"I figured out a trick to enchant them. I can teach you." We were heading to the Great Hall a few minutes late. Miles tried to arrive late and leave early—less chance of running into house-elves.

"I'd just get it stuck in my hair."

"It worked great though. With my parents, I mean. They got so mad they said I had to go outside to blow bubbles."

"So no more smoking?"

"Not if I can get my hands on some nicotine gum." He held out his hand, which shook visibly. "I've cheated once or twice. Didn't realize it would be so hard to stop."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, but I'm working on getting the gum. I know a Muggle guy who said it really helps."

*

I'd finally got my bearings. I could find my way to all my classes. But I still managed to get turned around once in a while. This happened one afternoon as I passed Dumbledore's office.

"Ah, Mr. Winters, so opportune that I should run into you."

"Me?"

"Yes, of course." Dumbledore stopped walking. "I'm afraid I must ask you for another favor."

"A favor?"

"Not to worry. It's quite simple. You see, Professor Sprout's young mandrakes' supple skin is irresistible to slugs, and so we've had to spray all the greenhouses with a steady supply of flesh-eating slug repellant."

"That doesn't sound like much of a problem."

"The problem, you see, is Flawkes."

"Your phoenix?"

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded. "I'm afraid I've spoiled him. He seems to believe he can't get by without a regular supply of juicy slugs."

"Okay." I had no idea where this conversation was going.

"And seeing as there are no longer any in the greenhouses, I thought I might ask you to procure some for me."

"Slugs? You want me to find you slugs."

"I'd do it myself, but you see, my knees are no longer what they used to be." He pulled up his robes, revealing startlingly skinny, wrinkled knees.

"Okay, I'll do it." I covered my eyes.

He pulled out a glass jar from beneath his robes. "Just five or six a week. Seven would be excellent, one a day."

"Sure," I told him. "Except I have no idea where to find slugs."

"That, I can help with." He put the jar in my hand. "I believe there should be an abundance around Haggard's winter garden."

"So I just dig around?"

"Precisely, my boy. Precisely." He started to turn. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some important business with the school's regents." I worried that I'd never get the sight of his legs out of my head.

I had no idea why Dumblesnore turned to me for help feeding Flawkes. But I felt as if I sort of owed him. He'd been the one who stood up for me when the rest of the teachers wanted to throw me out on my Muddle rear, so to speak.

The next afternoon, after the sun melted the thin layer of snow that had fallen the night before, I headed down to Haggard's hut. On my way out, I ran into Hannah in the courtyard. "Hey, Austin."

"Oh, hi. Did you hear Miles stopped smoking?"

"What!" She turned on her heels. "Seriously? For real?"

"Yes, he's even getting nicotine gum to help with the withdrawals."

"Wait, the gum doesn't taste like cigarettes, does it?"

"Umm, no, it's just a chemical, like caffeine. I don't think it tastes like anything."

"This is so, so good. I can still work this out." She smiled.

"Work what out?"

"Thanks, Austin." She walked towards the castle. "They'll have both of us to thank!"

"Girls," I mumbled.

All around his place, Haggard had planted gardens. Most were fallow, but he had a respectable-

sized winter garden, stretching probably over fifty feet, bordering the Fiendish Forest.

They called it the Fiendish Forest because, it was full of fiends and beasts and all manner of nasty stuff. Technically, students weren't allowed to wander in there, not without a teacher anyway. But the rule wasn't enforced, and students, often in groups, would sneak into the forest during the day to collect herbs and other reagents for potions.

At first, I had trouble finding the slugs, but once I ventured along the edge of the Forest, there were plenty to be found under logs and stones.

The bite of cold air nipped at my fingers. I stood up, and the jar slipped out of my hand, smashing into a dozen pieces. I swore under my breath.

"What's that?" a deep voice bellowed from inside Haggard's house. "Who's there?" The back door slammed open, and Haggard's huge form appeared, pointing an oversized crossbow at my head.

"Don't shoot." I threw my hands up. "I'm a student."

Quickly, the crossbow disappeared into the folds of Haggard's enormous coat. "That you are. Austin Winters, isn't it?"

I was so stunned he knew my name it took me a second to say, "Yes, sir."

"You don't need to go about sir-ing me." He waved his hand. "I'm not a teacher or nothing."

"Sorry."

"What's that you doing there?"

"I'm picking slugs."

"Dumblesnore asked you to do that?" I nodded. "Thought he was going to ask me." He looked disappointed.

"I think he wanted someone with good knees." I figured anyone his size must have trouble bending down. "I made a mess of it anyway. Broke my jar."

"Don't let them get away," he said. "I'll just fetch you a new jar."

He dashed inside his hut and, a minute later, returned with an old dirty jar. "Here we go. Should be tons to choose from, what with the roosters all dead."

"Thanks." I didn't think the slugs would care if the jar was clean or not.

"Enjoyed your Christmas card, I did." I was just able to make out most of what he said through his thick accent. "You've got quite the talent for drawing."

"Thank you," I said, a tad embarrassed. "And thanks for your... umm, treat."

"No problem." A rough smile peeked out from his beard. "Each year, I give a tin of treacle fudge to every student who stays over the holidays. It can be a lonely time of year at the school."

"Must be even worse out here, so far away from the castle."

"Oh, I'm happy out here. It suits me. Can get a wee bit lonely, I suppose, but students sometimes come around to visit."

"Out here?"

"Oh yes." He nodded. "Mostly Harry Potter, Ron, and their friend Hermione. But anyone's welcome. I always keep some fudge on hand, just in case."

"You know Hermione?" I asked, even more surprised.

"Oh yes. She's something special, that girl."

"I know," I agreed. "She's helping me study for my classes. We're kinda friends."

"You're friends with Hermione? You, from Slipperen House?" I couldn't give him high marks for subtlety.

"Yes, she doesn't care what house I'm from. She's great."

"Right you are there. Right you are."

It was all I could do to get away from Haggard. He kept trying to get me to come in and have a cup of tea or something to eat. I felt bad. I think he was lonely. I did listen to him go on for about twenty minutes, talking about something called Blast-butted Skewers. They sounded dreadful, though Haggard seemed sure they'd make great pets.

Chapter 18 – It's the Pipes, Stupid

Things at school started to get back to normal, at least for everyone else. There hadn't been another attack since Justin, and somehow everyone seemed to forget a monster lay hidden somewhere inside

the castle, stalking students. I didn't forget. I kept dreaming about snakes, the same dream I'd had since I was a kid, and others. Sometimes, I'd wake up and swear one had been whispering in my ear. I'd even throw off all my bedsheets to make sure nothing was slithering around under the covers.

Even if I could have put it out of my head, Hermione wouldn't let me forget. Her latest obsession was finding the entrance to the Chamber. She seemed convinced it was somewhere in the dungeons, as that was seen as Slipperen domain. I thought about telling her about the door I'd found, but I didn't know how'd I'd explain it or exactly where it was, and I really didn't want her finding it. I mean, she was a gifted witch, but I didn't think she was up to taking on Salazar Slipperen's monster.

Besides, if it really was the entrance to the Chamber of Serpents and I had opened it, I couldn't begin to face what that meant.

"Austin," Hermione said to me one evening in the library, "if you knew anything about the break-in, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"What break-in?" I put my copy of *Charms of Defense and Deterrence* down.

"You're joking, right? You really haven't heard? Someone broke into the Gryffinbore common room."

"Oh yeah. I heard something about that... But as far as I know, no one from Slipperen was involved."

"I didn't think so." She put her books down, and they fell into a pile between us. "I mean, they had to know the password to get in. So it had to be someone from Gryffinbore, right?"

"Not necessarily. Could be another explanation."

"Such as?"

I thought about it for a second. "Maybe someone in Gryffinbore is dating someone from another house, and she told her boyfriend the password to facilitate a late-night rendezvous."

"Possible, but unlikely." She was about to open her book but stopped. "Why would it have to be a *her*?"

"Didn't say it had to be a her. I just don't really understand half of what girls do, so it seemed a logical choice."

She shook her head.

"It could be someone from another house snuck into the common room," I said. "Like when a group of people come rushing in."

"That's impossible. They'd be seen."

"Not if they were, say, wearing stolen robes and snuck in with a crowd. Could even be that they used one of those potions that makes you look like someone else."

Hermione buried her head in her book and mumbled something about how hard those types of potions are to brew.

That night at dinner, when Miles walked in, he said, "Hey, you got the four galleons you owe me?"

"It's three galleons and two knuts, remember? I won some of it back last week." I shook my head.

"But I don't have any wizarding money anyway."

"But you've got pounds?"

"Sure."

"How many?"

"'Bout a hundred."

"Let's see, give me fifteen pounds, and we'll be even." He squeezed in next to me.

"How do I know that's really the right amount?"

"I'm letting you off easy." He grabbed a plate. "You should be paying for the entire thing, seeing how this is all your fault."

"What's my fault?"

"These horrible withdrawals." He pointed to beads of sweat on his forehead. "I'm sending it off to my older brother to get nicotine gum. He's gotta go to a Muggle doctor, pretend he has a smoking problem, and then pick it up at the chemist for me. He's pretty ticked."

"I take it he follows the family line of Muggle haters?"

"No, he's fine with them. Just a big hassle anytime he has to go into the real world."

"You mean the Muggle world."

"That's what he'd call it."

"I take it he's more like your parents than you."

"Yeah, I guess. He's not big into the Dark Arts the way they are. But he thinks it's his duty to save the old ways. Like he's bringing back balance to the Force or something."

"Hey, you've seen *Star Wars*? I didn't think wizards went to the movies."

"We tend to live in our own areas, not on our own planet. Besides, I have a lot of Muggle friends. Started hanging around them to tick off my parents. Now, though, we're good friends."

"I bet that Dark Arts stuff doesn't endear your family to their neighbors."

"Are you kidding? The Ministry raids us at least once a month." He stuffed an entire roll into his mouth. "They'll never find anything though. We've got houses and manors spread out all over. All pureblood families are rich."

"Except the Weaselys." I wondered how he could talk with so much food in his mouth.

"Them too. They just don't care for the money. The Weaselys own hundreds of thousands of acres around Devon."

"Then why do they dress like hobos?"

"They've let Muggles move in on most of their land. There're entire housing tracks on Weasely land."

"So they've lost it then."

"No way. If they filed a complaint with the Ministry, they'd evict the Muggles for sure. Wizarding law trumps squatter rights."

"What would they do with the people?"

"Put them up in council housing. Wipe their memories. Something like that."

"Wow."

"Not only that. The Weaselys could keep the houses. Any improvements to the land are theirs to keep, or the Ministry could return it to farmland if they requested."

"That's insane." I reached for a slice of pie.

"Now I've gotta go find a cigarette." He turned to the other side of the table.

"I thought you were quitting?"

"I am; just going to smell it," he said, glancing back.

I was surprised when a minute later Hannah Albot sat down next to me, followed by Rebecca and the shy girl, Samantha. Sharron Bones looked over from the Huffalump table.

"Hey, Austin." She smiled wide.

"Hi."

"I wanted to ask you if you've heard of this Muddle band from the States. They're called Nirvana?"

"Umm, yes, they're pretty big."

"Samantha says there's a hidden track on the CD with this demonic song?" Rebecca said, and the other girl, who I assumed was Samantha, went pink.

"Yeah, there's a hidden track, and it sounds sorta demonic. But it's a really good album."

"Do you have a copy?"

"Yep, got it for Christmas last year," I told them. "But we can't listen to it since nothing works here in the castle."

"Maybe we can check it out on the next Hogsmeade trip?" Hannah suggested.

"I have a portable CD player," Rebecca offered.

"Except, second years aren't allowed to go on the Hogsmeade trips." I ate the whipped cream off my pie.

"Well, Samantha's in fourth year, so she can go," Hannah said. "Oh, and Miles can go too. You can loan him the disk."

"What now?" Miles hadn't heard a word of our conversation until his name came up.

"You wouldn't mind taking Austin's Nirvana CD to Hogsmeade with you next week, would you?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Great," Hannah said. "Samantha will bring her Discman, so it's a date."

Samantha's face was red as a rose, but she smiled at Miles before standing up and leaving for her own table. Hannah and Rebecca followed.

"Did she just say date?" Miles asked.

"I think Hannah set you up with Samantha."

"Which one was Samantha?"

"The shy one with the red face."

"Okay." Miles turned and went back to his conversation.

A few nights later, I was awoken by dreams of snakes again. This time, the voice lingered even after I awoke. "Kill. Tear... Murder. Kill."

Needless to say, I wasn't falling back to sleep. I sat in my bed until the first girls got up. Some of the girls awoke every morning two hours before breakfast to get ready. I had no idea how someone could take that long to get dressed, even with hair and makeup and stuff. It was a Saturday, so only a couple rose early, but I followed a pair headed to the restrooms. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I didn't want to go walking around the castle by myself.

As we walked, I kept imagining the snake just out of earshot.

I got ready, the only boy in the restroom at that hour, and went for breakfast.

On Saturday, breakfast didn't actually start until eight, but there were always donuts and scones sitting out in the morning. I grabbed a bite and headed to the library.

Normally, I wouldn't go to the library on a weekend. But there was a Quiltage match today, and since Slipperen wasn't playing, I wasn't going to bother to go.

I was reading up on snakes, all the different types. Turns out there are tons of magical kinds: sea serpents, vipers, pythons, eels, adders, cobras. And there was even an entire book on speaking to them.

"Austin." Hermione walked towards me. "What are *you* doing in the library on a Saturday?"

"I'm skipping the Quiltage match. I don't much care to watch people getting maimed."

"I've never met anyone who dislikes Quiltage as much as you."

"Last game, two players ended up in the hospital. One of them was your best friend, Harry. He broke every bone in his arm."

"He only broke one bone. Luckhart liquefied the rest... But yes, it can get a bit rough."

"And what was up with that? Two kids lying injured on the field, and the school sent the least

competent teacher to deal with it while the rest of the staff watched from the stands?"

"They came down later."

"Yeah, after Harry's arm looked like it had been turned to silly putty."

Obviously trying to change the subject, she looked down at my book. "*Mesron's Guide to Snakes and Serpents*. Why are you reading that?"

"I've been thinking. Salazar Slipperen could talk to snakes. And a serpent is on the Slipperen House coat of arms, It's even called the Chamber of Serpents, so the monster must be a snake."

"I've had similar thoughts." Hermione's eyes were wide with surprise. "But a snake, even lots of them, wouldn't be enough to scare the teachers."

"If it was big enough, it might. There're some huge serpents in here." I turned the book towards her.

"That's it." She started digging through the pages. "A huge snake... A basilisk. It fits everything."

"A what?"

"A basilisk is a huge, poisonous snake—it can kill with just a look. But if you only see its reflection, it petrifies you."

"Like all the kids who've been attacked. But how does a huge snake get around without being seen?"

"Let's see. It couldn't be invisible." Hermione glanced up, tapping her forehead. "Maybe secret passages? The school has lots of those."

"Miles said the Chamber was secretly built at the same time as the plumbing. Hogwarts was one of the first buildings in Britain to have indoor plumbing."

"I knew that. It's in *Hogwarts: A History*." She didn't look down.

Just then, I heard the voice. "Kill. Must kill."

"Did you hear that?"

Hermione was in a deep trance. "Huh? I didn't hear a sound."

"Does it say anything in there about the snake talking?"

"Talking?" She wasn't paying attention but was scanning the book.

"The giant snake, does it speak?" I raised my voice.

"Only if you're a Parselmouth." She wrote something in the book.

"Hey," I said, "you can't write in there."

She ripped the page out.

"Whoa, you defaced a library book."

She looked at her hand in horror, as if it didn't belong to her, then she shook her head. "This is an emergency. I've gotta find Harry and Ron."

"Don't go. I have a bad feeling it's going to attack again." I stood up. "What if you run into the snake?"

"Good point... " She reached into her bag. "I'll use my makeup mirror."

"You wear makeup?" She was already running out of the library, using the mirror to peer around the door. "Be careful!" I yelled.

I put away the quill and the book with the page torn out of it, mimicking Hermione's voice.

"Nobody respects books more than me. Yeah, right." I tried to ignore the whispering voice that I could just make out.

Chapter 19 – Dumblesnore Sours

It was a couple hours later when I heard.

"I've got the best news!" Malfoy yelled as he ran into the common room. It looked as though he might cry tears of joy. "It got the Muddblood!"

"What daft bosh are you talking, Malfoy?" one of the seniors asked.

"Danger. The monster got her."

"Hermione, is she okay?" I jumped up.

"Who cares?" Malfoy stepped in front of me. "We're all supposed to wait here. Snape will be around soon to make an announcement."

I didn't mean to, but Malfoy got in my way, and I pushed him as I went by—must have been harder

than I thought because he went flying onto the floor.

I ran all the way to the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey pointed to one of the beds as I ran in.

"Is she"—Hermione looked cold, almost frozen—"dead?"

"No, no, dear." Madam Pomfrey walked over. "Only petrified."

Hermione's makeup mirror sat on the stand between her and another Gryffinbore girl I recognized, who must have been attacked at the same time. "You can make her better, right?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid it's going to take a while. We have to wait for the mandrakes to mature."

"Can't you get mandrakes from someplace else?"

"I'm afraid we require fresh mandrake. And they are difficult to acquire."

I argued with her about finding another source for several minutes before she kicked me out. There were four petrified students now. I had to find Dumblesnore. I'd tell him everything, even try to show him where I thought the Chamber was. And I was sure he knew how to get a hold of fresh mandrake root. It grows wild, so it had to be simple to find.

I headed right to his office. The walk seemed strange with no one else in the halls. When I got there, a small crowd of adults was gathered around the entrance.

"What do you mean I can't get into his office? I'm the Minister of Magic." I recognized the Minister from his pictures in the *Prophet Post*, Corominas Fudge. Except in color, his outfit made him look completely color-blind.

"I didn't say that you weren't allowed in his office, Minister," McDonagall said as several self-important types stood around with frowns. "Just that no one knows the password."

"I can't believe he vacated the premises so quickly. Contact Dumblesnore at once. If we are to assign a new headmaster, we must get in."

"I'll send an owl right away. But we must remember Dumblesnore hasn't been permanently dismissed. It may be premature to replace him."

"Exactly where has the headmaster gone?" Fudge asked.

"I'm afraid he didn't say, exactly." McDonagall glanced at me.

Fudge wasn't happy. "Contact me at the Ministry the second you hear from him."

"Oh, I will. *If* I hear from him. He said something about a possible trek to eastern Belarus."

"What do you want?" The Minister of Magic looked down at me like I was something the dog had deposited on the floor.

"Sorry. I was just looking for the headmaster. I didn't realize—"

"Well, he's gone. Now if you—"

McDonagall interrupted him. "Mr. Winters. The headmaster left this for you." She handed me a note with a wax seal on it.

"For me?" I took the note.

Fudge moved behind me as if to look over my shoulder. I didn't think he was about to let me leave without reading it.

I took a big side step and opened it just enough so I, but no one else, could see it. The letter read:

"Dear Austin,

I'm afraid I must ask more of you. Circumstances require me to vacate my post for a short while. While I am gone, I would ask that you please look after Flawkes. Instead of leaving the slugs with me, please feed him one or two a day. I may send him on errands, so don't be alarmed if you don't find him on his perch.

I have changed the password to my office but only slightly. I think if you recall our last meeting, a nice American boy like you should have no trouble ascertaining the new password.

Sincerely and with the greatest thanks,

Alfred Percival Wulfric Briant Dumblesnore"

"Well?" Fudge asked as if he had some sort of right to my private correspondence.

"It's about the slugs."

"Slugs?"

"Yes, the kind that like the dirt." *As opposed to the kind that prefer political office.* "See, I've been collecting them. Sort of a school assignment."

"I see." Fudge looked disappointed and turned from me. I quickly left before anyone could inquire

further.

I spent the rest of the day sitting in the common room blaming myself while the events of the past few months swarmed around in my head. I was startled when an owl swooped by, dropping off a package in Miles's lap.

"How did an owl get into the dungeon?"

Miles ripped the paper off and tore into the box. "Oh my God, it's here." Immediately, he popped two pieces of nicotine gum, spitting his bubble gum out into his old ashtray.

"Oh, that's gross."

He ignored me, reading the included letter. "Turns out my brother didn't need to see a doctor after all. You can just go into a chemist's and buy the gum with an ID. All he had to do was go to Knockturn Alley to get one."

"Does this mean I can have my fifteen pounds back?"

"Oh, sweet nicotine, I can feel your effects already."

Miles's good mood only irritated me, and I ignored him the rest of the night. I didn't realize how late it was until Miles got up and started putting his books away. "You coming?"

I looked around at the vacant room. Even the make-out nook was empty. Except for a few red and white coals, the fire had died. "I'll come up in a bit."

"She'll be okay. You know that?"

"Yeah, I know. Hope I didn't make a scene?"

"What, you mean Malfoy? I think most everybody thought it was the funniest thing they'd seen all term."

Once I had the room to myself, things started to come into focus. Hermione had been attacked minutes after I'd heard the voice—just like all the other attacks. I couldn't deny it any longer. I could hear and understand the snake. It was the same voice from that night I'd gotten lost. It was me. It had to be. I had opened the Chamber of Serpents. It didn't matter that I'd done it by accident. I had to fix it before someone got killed.

If I could open the Chamber, I figured I must be able to reseal it. But there were three problems:

First, I had no idea if I could find the door again. Even if I did, I'd have to make sure the snake was in there before closing it. And third, I was scared of snakes, even small ones.

The issue of making sure the snake was in the Chamber turned out to be purely intellectual. Assuming Hermione was right and the snake used the plumbing, that limited where it could go, as it could only fit in the larger main pipes. And since I always heard it when it was on the move, it must spend most of its time in the Chamber, only coming out to hunt students.

I was tempted to ask Miles for help. He was always up for an adventure. But I didn't want to put anyone else in danger. Besides, what would I say? *Hey, guess what? Turns out I opened the Chamber of Serpents, and I'm probably the Heir of Slipperen since, as I haven't mentioned, I can understand snakes.*

No, I was on my own.

The entire faculty and even the ghosts patrolled the castle each night, but no one was down in the dungeon, probably because none of the students from Slipperen had been attacked. Everyone figured we were safe down in our dark, dingy corner.

At first, I tried to locate the door with my wand lighting my path. But I kept walking in circles. So I put it out and stumbled around as I had before. I'm not normally afraid of the dark, but when you know there's really something in it, something huge and scaly with large poisonous fangs, that's a different thing entirely.

I'd never realized how vast the dungeons were. They seemed to go on forever. It was no wonder no one had ever found the Chamber.

Finally, after almost two hours, I spotted the snake sculpture and knew I was close. In a couple more minutes, I'd located the entrance.

Casting *Lumenos* revealed the old, decayed metal door. Rusty snakes seemed to slither in and out of the metalwork. I tried the locking spell a dozen times, but the door wouldn't stick. I spent forever examining it, trying to find a latch, knob, anything to shut it for good. It looked as if the snakes' heads moved—acting like bolts to hold the door closed. However, I couldn't figure out how to get them to lock. I even tried *Locomotor Inflectere* on some of the gears, but they wouldn't budge. Never mind

locking, the door wouldn't even stay closed. Every time I pushed it with my foot, it creaked and slowly swung open.

Disappointed, I turned to head back. Something stopped me. A question: *what lay behind the door?*

It stood open about a foot. Without moving or even touching it, I positioned myself to peek in. A huge, wide hallway lay cold and unused. Five-foot-high pipes fed into it, and a dozen or more lined both walls. A few drops of water dripped to the damp floor. A feeling of dread washed over me. I quickly stepped back.

On my way to the common room, I tried to remember my steps by noting every tapestry, suit of armor, even odd-shaped stones in the walls. By the time I got back, I felt confident I could find my way again. Probably.

If I could only figure out how to close it.

The faculty was so on edge they made everyone go to class in groups led by a teacher. It didn't work very well. Almost every student had a unique schedule. Students were late, landed in the wrong classes. Teachers wouldn't get back to their own classes until they were half over, during which time students sat unsupervised at their desks thinking the monster might appear at any moment. One time, Snape arrived over an hour late and barged into the classroom so violently two girls from Hufflepuff screamed, convinced it was some evil monster—besides Professor Snape, I mean.

By the second week, the *no student without an adult* rule was only sporadically enforced. If someone wanted to go to the library, they'd just make sure to go with a group. Everyone tried to stay together, and teachers still led the largest groups, but if anyone was stupid enough to go off on their own, none of the staff had the time or inclination to stop them. Still, I figured the best time to feed Flawkes was when no one was around, usually early in the morning, as most of the teachers patrolled the corridors all night and so slept in as late as possible.

"Sherbet lemon."

I knew Dumbledore had changed the password, but I still hoped the old one might make something happen or perhaps give me some sort of clue.

In his note, he seemed sure I could figure the new one out.

"Lemons... lemonade... sherbet ice cream... lemon cookies... rainbow sherbet..." It had something to do with those candies he ate, the lemon drops, only here they were called sherbet lemons. But I'd told the headmaster they had a different name in America.

That was it. "Lemon drops." The stone gargoyle began to rotate. I jumped on the first step and rode it to the top. Right before it stopped, the gargoyle spoke, freaking me out a bit. "Lucky guess."

Flawkes wasn't there. On Dumbledore's desk, next to the empty jar was a long scroll labeled: Order of Suspension for Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Magic and Mystery. It went on to say the Governors were removing Dumbledore because of his failure to find and close the Chamber of Serpents, which made my head spin with guilt.

Beneath the order of suspension was something even more interesting. All I could read was:

Prophecy of: Cybill Treelawnie

Date: May 18th, 1980

Subjects: Harry Potter & He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

Recorded by: Albert Percival Wulfric Briant Dumbledore

This prophecy will incinerate if removed from the grounds of Hogwarts.

"The one with the p—"

That was all I could see without moving the page. And while it would have been easy to do, it felt wrong. It was one thing reading stuff left out in the open, right next to the slug jar, but quite another to go rummaging through Dumbledore's personal papers.

The temptation didn't last long because the next morning, the removal order had been rolled up and moved to the side. In place of the prophecy was a pile of ashes. I wondered if it was torched on purpose or if someone had tried to apparate with it. That didn't seem likely, as I didn't think anyone had access to his office, except for me—and Dumbledore, of course. Even if someone could get in, I'd read that no one can apparate out of Hogwarts—yes, I had read some of Hermione's Christmas present.

During subsequent visits, I got the feeling Dumbledore might still have been using this office. Sometimes, his chair or quill would be moved. It might have been McDonagall or one of the other

teachers, but I didn't think they knew the password. I thought Dumblesnore kept them in the dark so they wouldn't have to lie to the Minister of Magic or be forced to talk with Veritaserum.

Chapter 20 – Hermione's Danger

Spring was in full force, and even though the slugs got juicier and easier to find, I no longer looked forward to collecting them. The Minister of Magic had thrown Haggard into a high-security wizard prison. The *Prophet Post* claimed he'd had something to do with it the last time the Chamber had been opened but that the records had been sealed since he was a minor. So every time I went down there, I had to see Haggard's dark and lonely hut. Officially, students still weren't allowed to walk around the school grounds unescorted, so once a week or so I got up with the sun to catch more slugs. This was usually followed by a trip to the library to look up ways to lock doors. I found loads of information on how to unlock or magically booby-trap doors, but I found nothing at all on closing them back up afterwards except a single line by an old wizard who was once a headmaster at Hogwarts who cautioned, "If you do not wish to be discovered unlocking a door, it's best to leave it alone in the first place."

Weeks ago, the school had announced that further trips to Hogsmeade would be canceled. Miles didn't seem disappointed. Still, when they did an about-face, he found me in our room.

"Hey, mate, you have that Nirvana CD?"

"Sure, why?" I got up and went over to my trunk.

"Hogsmeade is back on."

I took out my soft-sided CD case. "You can take the whole thing if you want." I handed it to him.

"Just remember there's like four hundred dollars in CDs there."

"Got it."

"So... do you like this bird?"

"Firstly, don't say bird. You can't pull it off. And I've never even spoken to her. I've only even seen her for all of five seconds."

"Yeah, but you could get out of it. If you wanted."

"Get out of it? Are you serious?" He tilted his head in the direction of the common room. "Have you seen the slags in there? That's all we've got to choose from. If this girl doesn't mind me being in Slipperen, I'm giving her a chance."

"They're not all slags."

"No, there're a few very pretty, very lovely ladies in Slipperen and almost a hundred guys. Get the math?"

"Sure, sure. I think Samantha's pretty hot, myself."

"Glad I've got your approval." He smiled.

Miles was the only one who things were looking up for. The snake seemed to be venturing out more and more. Even though my phobia of snakes and only grown, I couldn't stand for anyone else to get hurt and felt responsible for the attacks. So, reluctantly at first, I took to chasing the snake around the castle, well the dungeon mostly. Stupid, I know, but I felt sure I could track where it went by its voice without actually seeing it, like I could stay one step ahead of it. I even took to trying to speak to it. When it heard me, it seemed to flee, and I almost felt as if I could push it back into the Chamber.

All of this was incredibly risky—not just getting eaten by a giant snake, but also getting caught, which eventually happened.

It was close to the end of term, and since I hadn't been studying with Hermione, I figured this would likely be my last term at Hogwarts. Still, I was in a good mood, as I'd managed to scare the snake away that morning. I wandered the corridors by myself and decided to visit Hermione.

"What are you doing here?" Madam Pomfrey asked through a crack in the door. "Students are not allowed to wander the corridors unaccompanied."

"Oh, I was accompanied. I was with a group of students heading to Charms class, and I just slipped in here to check on Hermione."

"I'm sorry, but the infirmary is closed to visitors."

"Oh... but Professor Snape gave me special permission." I was betting on the fact that she

disliked dealing with Snape so much she wouldn't bother to check.

"Well then, I guess I can make an exception." She opened the door. "You'll be happy to hear the mandrakes are just about ready."

"You've been saying that forever."

She frowned. "Professor Sprout is harvesting them today. In a day or two, Snape should have the potion ready."

"Great." I headed over to Hermione.

Someone had removed the mirror that had been on the stand next to her bed, and instinctively I looked down at her hands, both of them. One was up, probably from holding the mirror when she was attacked. The other was down at her side. But a bit of paper poked out from beneath her fingers. It took some effort, but I pried the paper out of her hands. It was the book entry on the basilisk, and in the margin she'd written one word: pipes. Total disappointment. I'd hoped for a clue, something I didn't know. I folded the note and tried to stuff it back in her hand, but her flesh was cold, solid as stone, and the paper didn't want to go back. I spent about ten minutes trying to force it in her hand. It felt wrong taking it from her, and I was determined to give it back. I managed to get it stuck in good, though I hadn't folded it up well, and half of it stuck out.

As Madame Pomfrey helped a guy who'd come in with a sprained ankle—another victim of the moving staircases—I snuck out.

I'd only gone twenty feet before a deep, nasal voice bellowed, "You there."

I froze. "Hey, Professor Snape. How's it going? I was just leaving the hospital wing, looking for a group to take me back to *our* dormitory."

"Students are not allowed in the hallways unescorted."

"Oh, no, I was just looking for someone to escort me. You see I wasn't—"

"Silence." I didn't know why he was making a big deal out of this. "You will come with me for detention."

Reluctantly, I followed Snape to the Potions room. He pulled out a decapitated mandrake. At least it would have been decapitated if it had an actual head. He started on a potion, and since he was

grinding up the mandrake, I figured it was to restore Hermione and the other students.

Smape made me sit there and do nothing. No studying, no lines, no reading, nothing. Just sit and stare at the walls. So it was no wonder that I heard the basilisk as it left the Chamber.

"Ummm, Mr. Smape." I glanced in the direction of the sound. "I have somewhere I really need to be."

"It's Professor. And you, Mr. Winters, are in detention. I will write you a note when you leave, and you may make up any studies you are missing."

Something seemed different. This time, the snake wasn't saying how it longed to kill and murder and gloomy stuff like that. It said something different. "Must obey. Must collect her. Must not fail."

"Professor Smape, I really have to go... my bladder. I've got a weak bladder."

"Then go," Smape yelled without looking up from his potion.

Jumping up, I turned for the door. "Not so fast. I said you may go. I did not say you could leave."

"What?"

"In your robes. If you can't hold it, then go in your robes."

"That's crazy."

"There's a simple spell to clean you up. You aren't the first student with a hyperactive bladder."

What a jerk—making me piss my own pants. I mean, what if I wasn't lying?

I tried to think of another excuse to leave. The monster's voice grew dimmer and dimmer.

"Please, Pro—"

"Enough." Smape's wand flashed in my direction. "Either shut up or I will silence you myself."

I didn't hear anything else for an hour. And despite my worry, I'd almost fallen asleep in my seat when an announcement, made by Professor McDonagall, boomed as if from a hidden loudspeaker, saying that students should go in groups to their common rooms, and teachers should meet in the staff room.

Smape opened the door and grabbed a student as he flew by.

"You, what's going on?" Smape held him by the collar.

The kid was out of breath and wore Huffalump robes. "I... I don't know, sir. I heard a rumor that

the monster has kidnapped a first year and taken her into the Chamber." I moaned and let my head hit the desk in despair.

"You two, stay here. And keep the door shut." Snape glanced at his half-finished potion, but immediately left, slamming the door behind him.

"McDonagall said to go to our common rooms," I yelled. He was already gone.

"I've gotta go," I told the kid from Huffalump. "Need to pee."

"You can't leave."

"Sorry, I gotta go." I rushed out the door.

"Don't leave me. It's not safe."

I didn't know where the snake had gone, so I decided to head to Dumblesnore's office. If he was really keeping an eye on things, I figured I might find him there. If not, I'd send him a note with Flawkes. I was pretty sure Flawkes trusted me enough to do that—at least if I appeared desperate enough. Then I could go get Miles, explain everything to him, and see if any other Slipperens would go with us to hunt the giant snake.

I expected to see a rush of kids heading to their common rooms, but the hallways were eerily quiet. I rode up the steps to Dumblesnore's office. He wasn't there, but thankfully Flawkes sat on his perch. I grabbed a clean sheet of parchment and started a note. Two massive claws dropped onto the desk in front of me. Startled, I fell back, landing in Dumblesnore's chair.

Standing over me, the huge, intimidating bird commanded my attention. He took two steps towards me and cried as if he was yelling at me. My mind began calculating the safest escape route when I noticed something tied to his leg: a small scroll.

Flawkes seemed to follow my eyes and pecked at the string tied to the note. I pointed, and I swear he nodded.

Very slowly, I inched my fingers forward and pulled on the ends of the string until the note dropped free. With one flap of his great wings, Flawkes jumped back onto his perch.

My hands shook as I opened the note.

"Austin,

It seems I have yet one more favor to ask of you this year, and it's the most important one. I have reason to believe that you know of at least one of the entrances to the Chamber of Serpents. Please take Flawkes along with the Sorting Hat into the Chamber and then seal it.

Do not explore the Chamber.

Do not attempt to take on the monster yourself.

Even if other students' lives appear in jeopardy, you are only to deposit Flawkes and seal the Chamber. Events must play out as predicted. I will take responsibility for everything else.

Please follow my instructions to the letter.

Yours truly,

Headmaster Albert Percival Wulfric Briant Dumblesnore

P.S. If you have trouble getting the Chamber sealed, try asking it."

"Seriously?" I looked to Flawkes, who didn't seem to like the plan any more than I did.

Turning for the Sorting Hat, I found its shelf empty. Instead it lay on one corner of the headmaster's desk, looking flat and lifeless. I thought about speaking to it, but decided against it in case the hat didn't want to go. I could hardly have blamed it.

As soon as I picked up the hat, Flawkes flew over and landed on my shoulder. I flinched, ready for his talons to dig into my skin, but they didn't. Except for the added weight, his touch was remarkably gentle.

Awkwardly, I headed to the dungeon. I didn't have the map and couldn't go back to the common room with a giant bird on my shoulder. But I'd spent so much time down there trying to herd the basilisk back that I knew my way around those dark and abandoned corridors better than most of the teachers.

I left my wand unlit, got lost once in one of those corridors that led you one place when you go down them and another when you go back, but found my way to the large snake statue without too much trouble.

Owing to the metal but realistic-looking snakes carved into it, I was reluctant to even touch the door. But using my foot, I managed to open it wide. As soon as I did, Flawkes took flight into the

Chamber.

"Don't forget the sorting hat." But before I'd even finished speaking, he'd snapped it out of my outstretched hand and headed into the recesses of the Chamber, the golden tips of his wings almost glowing in the darkness.

I backed up and stared at the entrance door.

"Try asking it to shut," I said to no one in particular. I didn't have a better idea, so why not? Only since it was the door to the basilisk's chamber, I used the same voice I used when talking to the snake. "Come on, please close, now." And like magic—well, it was magic—the door closed. One by one, the snakes made their way into position and with a clank bolted shut.

What to do now? I mean, a first year's life was in danger, and Dumblesnore had instructed me not to interfere. But he never said where I should go. I couldn't just wait in front of the door. There was no place to hide. So I headed back to the snake statue. It wasn't too far from the entrance, and I figured anyone heading that way would have to pass by.

Carefully, I got behind it and squatted down so my rear was on the floor.

Twenty minutes: that's how long it took for my legs to go numb. Then they began to burn. I had to stand up. Grabbing the top of the stone pedestal, I was about to pull myself up when voices drifted from down the hall. Only they did not come from the direction I expected. They came from the direction of the Chamber. No one slipped past me, so there must have been another entrance, one I'd not found.

I couldn't make out the words, but there was arguing—Luckhart and Harry—as if anyone needed the glory of defeating the basilisk less than those two. As their voices faded, I thought I heard Ron Weasley too. At least he could use a bit of fame. Maybe there'd be an award. He could use the money. Still, without Hermione, I worried they couldn't complete the task.

When their voices faded to nothing, I figured they must be close to the entrance.

I managed to get up and shake some feeling back into my legs. I thought about going to help or waiting around to see what happened, but I decided I'd been involved with enough trouble already and headed to the common room.

As I walked, a great explosion echoed behind me. I walked faster.

Chapter 21 –The House Cup

By evening, the school was abuzz with rumors about what had happened in the Chamber of Serpents. For once, I didn't know more than anyone else, and I liked it that way. The rumor was that Professor Luckhart had gone down to the Chamber to take on the basilisk himself and had almost died. Harry and Ron had saved him, though not before Harry seriously injured himself. Ron helped Luckhart while Harry faced and killed the basilisk alone, and he saved Ron's little sister to boot. That is, *if* the rumors were correct. Some first year from Gryffinbore even said Harry'd defeated *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named* in the Chamber, which I figured had to be a lie, seeing how that guy was long dead.

It amazed me how fast information spread at the school, especially since we were all still on lockdown in our common rooms.

One of the older prefects walked up to me. "Austin Winters." He held out his hand. "Take this. Go now."

I reached down and grabbed the note. It read, "Austin Winters is to report to McDonagall's office at once."

"Thanks," I said, grateful he hadn't read the note out loud.

I had no idea why I was going to McDonagall's office. Miles said she had been in Slipperen, which was why she always wore green. But I'd also heard the rumor that she'd once loved a Slipperen who'd been killed standing against *He Who Must Not Be Named* and wore green as a token of remembrance. She never showed any of us favoritism or contempt, so I wasn't sure. At least I knew how to get to her office. As I approached the Dark Arts tower, I ran into Harry Plotter. "Hey," I said, but he didn't seem to even see me. He was hopping down the hall with an old book in one hand and his sock, still half on his foot, in the other. One strange dude.

Dumblesnore smiled as I walked in, and Flawkes squawked so loud I jumped. I sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. Flawkes jumped up onto one of the armrests and nuzzled my arm with his

huge sharp beak. "Sorry, buddy, I don't have any slugs for you." He looked at me with marked disapproval.

"It seems you have made a new friend." Dumblesnore rolled up a piece of parchment he'd been writing.

"Feels more like I'm *his* house-elf."

Dumblesnore smiled. "He's not the only one who owes you thanks."

"It was nothing."

"Really?" Dumblesnore didn't seem to realize I was being polite. "I would have thought you'd feel quite put out."

"Let's say, a bit."

"If at the beginning of the term, someone would have told me I would rely on an American student to help save Hogwarts, I would have sent them to St. Munrow's Hospital for evaluation." He stood up from the desk, walked around, and took the seat next to me. Flawkes hopped over to his chair. "But it appears you've done just that."

"I wasn't the only one who helped save the school."

"No. There were others." Dumblesnore nodded.

"Like Harry and Ron."

"Let's not forget Hermione Danger's studious insights," Dumblesnore added.

"Oh, I helped her figure it all out."

"Is that so?" Dumblesnore seemed genuinely surprised, something I'd never seen before.

"Just a little. She's a genius," I admitted.

"I've asked a great deal of you this year, and you've come through for me, for the school, better than I could have ever imagined."

"Thank you." My cheeks went warm.

"In recognition of your efforts, I am granting two hundred points to Slipperen House and presenting you an award of Special Service to the School." He paused for a moment. "Unfortunately, your role in this incident must be kept, how is it you Americans say, under wraps?"

"I figured."

"There are things in motion at Hogwarts, important and dangerous things that I dare not even mention."

I'm not sure how I got so bold. Maybe it was because he sat there next to me, not across from me at his desk, but I blurted out, "You mean like sending Harry down to the Chamber of Serpents to face the basilisk by himself?"

Dumbledore wasn't fazed. "Not by himself. You helped see to that."

"Still, it was dangerous."

"Alas, the road Harry must travel is fraught with danger. But he showed great bravery and loyalty, or he would have never accomplished this task. If knowledge of his role in coming events were to get out, parents and professors would demand his removal from the school..." He looked down as if speaking to the floor. "Probably mine too."

"And what about me?"

"Your role, I hope, will be limited to this single occurrence."

"No, I meant what would people say if they knew I'd opened the Chamber?"

"You opened the Chamber?" He didn't seem a bit surprised this time.

"You must have figured I'm a parslemouth," I said. "I didn't know, and I accidentally opened the Chamber, and I heard the snake, but I didn't realize what I'd done. And when I figured it out, I told Hermione about it and even tried to close it, but I couldn't—not without your clue. And those students, they could have been killed, and it would have been my fault."

"Not yours. Mine."

"I feel so stupid."

"You were not the only one to hear the serpent and not realize its true nature."

"You mean you had an idea too?"

"Some of my decisions this term have been most difficult and might even be judged as negligent by others."

"Like the chickens? The book said all it takes to kill a basilisk is the crow of a rooster. So you

could have killed the thing at any time, say by releasing a bunch of chickens all around the school."

"I see that you've worked this all out." His eyes seemed to drill into me. "I treaded a fine line making sure no students were seriously injured. But for reasons I can't divulge, I needed to let events unfold."

"It sounds like a risky game."

"Risky, yes. The highest stakes imaginable. But no game" His eyes seemed to lose their twinkle for a moment. "The truth is I have greatly betrayed Harry Potter."

I didn't know what to say. The first thing that came to me was, "You must have had a good reason."

"To save the world."

"That seems like a pretty damn good reason."

"At times."

Dumbledore sucked on a sherbet lemon drop, and we sat and stared at each other for a couple minutes. "Before you go, I do have one question for you, Austin. How did you locate the entrance to the Chamber of Serpents?"

"Just wandering around?"

"In the girl's lavatory?"

"Huh?"

"Harry discovered the entrance to the Chamber in the girl's lavatory."

"Must be more than one then. I found it way back in the dungeon."

"Teachers have been searching for the Chamber for nearly a thousand years, and two students find separate entrances in the same year."

"Trust me, I wasn't searching for it." I got up and started out the door.

"Professor." I stopped and turned around. "I can talk to snakes. And that's a really rare thing, right?"

"In all my years, I've only met two other wizards who possessed that particular ability."

"So, am I the Heir of Slipperen?"

"That, my boy, is an excellent question. If I am correct, there is only one *true* heir, and you are not

he. Still, it seems likely that some of Salazar's blood, perhaps very diluted, maybe even from as far back as Merlin himself, runs through your veins."

"That would mean I'm not really Muggle-born?"

"There are many great and powerful Muggle-born witches and wizards. Your friend Miss Danger comes immediately to mind. But you are not one of them, of that much I am sure, or you would have never been sorted into Slipperen House." He turned from me and grabbed a sheet of parchment and quill from the desk.

"Thanks." I had so many more questions for him. Like had he really been pushed out of his post at Hogwarts, or had he allowed that to happen as part of his plan? How had he managed to make sure every student was only petrified and not killed? And what was this big thing he had to let play out, and why? Most of all, I wanted to know what the rest of that prophecy was. But I knew he had no more answers for me.

I immediately ran into students heading to the Great Hall for a special feast. Shortly after I arrived, McDonagall announced that the end of term tests would be canceled, which meant I wouldn't flunk out. Hermione arrived shortly after everyone else, fully healed. I gave her a wink when no one was looking, and she smiled back. We both knew I couldn't go up to her in front of everybody without causing a scandal. The school was just too segregated.

As always, I sat next to Miles. He kept going on about how a house-elf had gone ballistic and attacked his master right in the school, proving, he insisted, that house-elves were a danger to the entire wizarding world.

Hogwarts really knows how to party. We stayed up all night, singing and carrying on. They even served Butterbeer, which after six or seven does give you a slight buzz. The only low point was when Dumbledore announced the winner of the House Cup. Slipperen was clearly in the lead, thanks to my two hundred points (which no one knew about). But just like everyone said happened last year, Dumbledore announced an extra two hundred points for Harry and another two hundred for Ron in recognition of their services to the school. As Dumbledore announced the final totals and that Gryffinbore was again the winner of the House Cup, it seemed his eyes fell on me, almost as if he

were apologizing just to me. And I was disappointed, but I hoped there'd be other years. Malfoy and his gang took it hard. They stood up and left the feast while Dumblesnore was still speaking.

It was their loss. They missed Haggard returning and everyone partying it up. Singing songs. Lots of kids dancing. Miles went over and sat down next to Samantha right at the Huffalump table. This caused quite a stir, but none of the Huffalumps openly objected. I guess their date had gone all right.

As the sun came up, showering streaks of red orange onto the ceiling, I started a conga line that students from every house joined. For once, it didn't feel like we were Slipperen and they were the other houses that hated and despised us. For once, we were all just students of Hogwarts—one big, powerful, crazy mob—it felt right, and I loved every second of it.

* * * * *

Thank you for reading *Harry Plotter and the Chamber of Serpents*. I hoped you enjoyed it. If so, please consider helping me spread the word by leaving a review or passing a copy along to a friend. Even though this book is a parody, out of respect for JK Rowling I made this book free, and thus released it under a Creative Commons license so it may be distributed in any matter, as long as it is done without charge (for free).

You may also want to sign up for my monthly mailing list at: www.MJWare.com. You'll be eligible for free newsletter only stories. Plus, I'll notify you when my newest titles are ready for download.

In the mean time, please enjoy a five-chapter preview of my *Novel Super Zombie Juice Mega Bomb*.

* * *

The rest of this document is copyright MJWare 2011, 2012, 2015—including here with permission.

Super Zombie Juice Mega Bomb – Extended Preview

Chapter 1 – Blizzards, Bites, and Zombies

Ever have a really bad day? I'm not talking miss the bus, caught cheating on a test, bike gets stolen bad. I mean people dying and coming back from the dead to eat your brains bad.

This whole mess started one night when my best friend Misty messaged me, "*DQ run now!*"

I'm as down with Butterfinger Blizzards as anybody, but it was almost eleven p.m. Somehow, she talked me into it—I can never say no to her. I mean, I can say it once or twice, but after eight or nine times, I give in.

You might have guessed, we didn't exactly ask permission. Misty snuck out by climbing down a window above her garage and jumping into an overgrown bush. Maybe it was the three waffle sundaes she'd eaten, but to get back up it looked like she was going to need a boost.

"Ready?" I whispered, clasping my hands over my knee.

"I don't think so, Nate. I'm wearing a skirt." Even in the dim glow of the neighbor's porch light, I could see the wrinkles in her brow.

"Then how you going to get back up?"

"I can climb."

"In your skirt?" I stood back, folding my arms. Misty had always been more t-shirt and cutoff jeans. "Why'd you wear a skirt, anyway? Who sneaks out in a skirt?"

She ignored me and started pulling herself up the rain gutter. By the third try, I knew, skirt or not, I was going to have to help.

I stepped forward when from behind me came a deep grunt, like a yeti clearing its throat.

Turning around, Misty's dad towered over us, arms crossed, naked except for knit socks and shorts; his huge, hairy muffin-top forcing the band of his briefs into submission.

Even in his skivvies, he was an imposing figure. Picture Atlas, if all he ever held up were jelly donuts. I didn't know if I should laugh or run.

Normally Misty's dad is too nice, one of those big guys with an even bigger soft spot—especially when it came to his only daughter—but that night, boy, did he holler.

He grounded Misty for the whole summer. Not from her girlfriends, just from me—even canceled our camping trip. Our families go every year, so that made it a tradition or something.

Almost three weeks passed before I heard a peep from Misty. I wasn't sure if her dad really came down on her or if she was just too busy to bother with me.

Finally, she called. "Guess I should feel honored."

"Hey, Nate, ready to go camping?"

"Who's this? I think you may have dialed the wrong number."

"Nathan!" she screamed. "Dad's keeping me under house arrest. Even confiscated my cell. It's so humiliating." The echo told me she was probably hiding out in her dad's workshop. "So, you up for camping or not?"

Apparently, no one had bothered to tell her the trip was off. I tried to break the news gently. "Where've you been? Your dad put the smackdown on camping."

There wasn't much to do in our tiny mountain town, so this trip was the highlight of our summer: fishing, ghost stories, eating s'mores until you puke.

"Just because our parents are being stupid doesn't mean we can't go."

I don't normally do crazy things like run away from home. Which is probably why we weren't prepared. We lasted all of one night. Who knew a jumbo box of Little Betty Brownie Bites could go so fast?

On our way back, we knew we were in trouble, but had no idea just how much.

"Maybe running away wasn't such a good idea," I said, scanning the lifeless town. The sun crawled over the horizon, casting long shadows like bony fingers reaching down to clutch the empty streets.

"You think?" Misty said with an edge to her voice.

We'd been walking around for over an hour and hadn't seen anyone. "How'd I know everyone would..."

"Vanish." She finished my sentence. "They're all gone, Nathan. They can't all be out looking for us, not every single person in the whole entire town." She shook her head.

"Calm down. Let's think this out." I listened for familiar sounds, people, cars...even the trees were silent.

"Think what out? Nobody's here. I can't even get a single bar." Misty stood on the side of the road, brandishing her phone like a weapon.

"Updating your online status is the least of our problems," I shot back.

"This isn't a joke, Nate. We're in deep here. Deep, deep, deep!" She paused—probably winded from carrying on so much—then pointed across the street. "Look, someone's there."

From across the road, Mayor Frank waddled towards us. "Just our luck, only person in town and it has to be him?"

"Geez, a little early to be wasted," I said. Besides mayor, he was also the town drunk.

"Mayor Frank, over here," Misty yelled.

"Now you've done it. He's headed this way." I wiped my palms on my jeans; something wasn't right.

"Nate, shut up. We could use a little help."

He almost fell over three times while crossing the street. His clothes looked like they'd spent more time in the gutter than on his back. His eyes, swollen and cloudy—he looked sick. I'd never seen eyes like that.

The mayor didn't say a word, just reached out his two pasty arms. I thought he might shake our hands. He was one of those phony politicians. Instead, he grabbed Misty and went in for a big, open-mouth kiss.

I'm not sure what came over me. I'd never hit anyone—except Misty's older brothers—and then only in a desperate act of self-defense. But I wasn't about to let this creep kiss her.

I cocked my arm back and with everything I had, socked the mayor in the face.

He folded, flat to the floor.

Grabbing my hand, I winced in pain. Misty screamed, her long hair whipping around as she jumped back.

My mind raced. *Oh, no. I just punched the mayor.* I took a step toward him. "Mr. Mayor, I'm sorry. I thought you—"

I looked down at my hand as I spoke, thinking maybe I busted a knuckle. It throbbed so bad I

didn't notice the mayor roll over and grab my foot until it was too late; he sank his teeth into my lower leg.

"Ouch," I yelled as I tried to wiggle free. He wouldn't let go. What was I supposed to do? Ever been bitten by your little sister? Try a three-hundred pound drunk politician.

I just started kicking. After the third kick, my hiking boot flew off, still dangling from his mouth.

"Nate, you kicked the mayor in the face!" Misty's hands covered her mouth, but did little to mask her expression of horror.

We took off running, our backpacks clanking behind us.

"Those are Gore-tex boots, they're over two hundred bucks," I said, running lopsided down the street. *If my dad found out, he'd kill me.*

I looked at Misty. Her wide, hazel eyes scanned the deserted roads, flashing with alarm. Standing tall, California Firs blocked our view more than a couple blocks. I couldn't help but feel responsible for this mess. I should have tried to talk her out of running away.

Maybe Misty's dad was right; I was a bad influence.

Chapter 2 – Snookum's Last Stand

A few minutes after punching a public servant in the face, we finally stopped running in front of Misty's house with its familiar faded cedar siding. It was old and rustic, but solid. It'd probably last forever.

I wiggled my fingers, making sure they still worked. It never hurt when a guy punched someone in one of those old karate movies Misty and I used to watch.

"Nate, what the heck happened?" Misty was breathing hard. She might have been in better shape than me. Athletic, but definitely not in a big-boned, husky sorta way.

"I don't know." I took a few deep breaths before continuing, "I've heard the mayor is grabby,

but that was ridiculous. He could be your gramps. And did you see his fogged-over eyes?"

"His eyes? You shoulda smelled his breath—like a rotting cheeseburger." Misty squirmed from head to toe.

"Wait until I tell your brothers. Or your dad—"

"Nathan Patrick Lewis. You are not to tell a soul." Misty kicked up some dirt as she stood nose-to-nose with me. I'd been praying all year for a growth spurt. If it didn't come soon, she'd be taller than me. "Do you understand?" she said as if she could intimidate me.

"Don't worry, who'd believe me? I mean, the mayor trying to kiss *you*."

"Kiss me? I thought he was going to swallow my face, and what about you kicking his head like a soccer ball? What the heck are we supposed to do now?" Misty's fingers grabbed a clump of her long, wavy chestnut hair and she started chewing. I knew the hair thing meant she was either shy or nervous—or maybe completely freaked, like now.

"He was really gone. Bet he won't remember." I rubbed my leg where the mayor had tried to take out a chunk. "I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"Hey, look who's still here." Misty pointed to her neighbor's dog. A spoiled, obnoxious poodle, with an equally spoiled and obnoxious name: Snookums. "Mrs. Redberg would have never left Snookums alone."

"I hate that little rat dog. He always barks at me." He must have heard, 'cause he ran up to the fence yelping at full volume.

I'd *never* kick a dog, though I've heard poodles fly pretty far. I kicked the fence instead.

"Hey, Nate, stop picking on the dog."

It felt safe in Misty's house, something familiar that never changed. Wall-to-wall thick orange shag carpet, dark wood paneling, even popcorn on the ceiling—with sparkles. The sparkles were pretty cool.

The lock squealed as Misty bolted it behind me. I grabbed a pair of old sneakers. Worn and caked with dried mud, I didn't bother looking for a nicer pair. Her brothers probably didn't own any.

"I'm going to go powder my face," she said.

"Powder it with what?"

She shook her head and closed the bathroom door with a thud.

In the family room, I messed with the cable and Internet. A couple minutes later, Misty came in to supervise. Neither of us spoke. I kept rechecking the connections, more than a little desperate to get them working.

Nothing.

I was opening my mouth to tell Misty that it was useless when the windows, really the whole house, shook with the crack of thunder.

"Summer storm?" Misty asked, her voice higher than normal.

Indian Springs was deep in California's Sierra Mountains. Nothing but rivers and trees surrounded the place. Summer thunderstorms were pretty common.

"Maybe. Sounded more like an explosion," I said.

"This can't be good. Let's look out my window."

I hadn't been allowed upstairs for years. Mr. Wibbles still sat in his designated spot on the head of Misty's bed, but long gone were the plastic horses and pink curtains. Now the room was littered with pictures of her with girlfriends and posters of guys who were apparently so cool it didn't matter how bad their haircuts were.

From her window upstairs, we had a good view, but no sign of an explosion and not a cloud in the sky.

I chewed on one of the straps from my backpack as I looked over the vacant streets. The strap tasted like dirt and charcoal, so I spit it out. *What was going on? Where were our parents?*

"Think it could be a fast moving storm?" Misty asked.

I looked again. "No wind. I don't think so."

We stared helplessly out the window at the tiny town surrounded by rolling waves of trees and green surf as far as we could see. Finally, we headed back downstairs.

KABOOM!

Another explosion, but way larger. I felt it in my legs, as if the whole earth threatened to rip

apart under my feet.

"Nathan, what the heck was that?" Misty's summer-bronzed skin went pale.

We flew back to the window, dodging pictures that had shaken off the walls and lay scattered along the floor.

Outside nothing changed. Well, almost nothing, that pint-sized dog started barking. Guess I couldn't blame him.

We kept our eyes glued to the window, searching for any sign of movement; a person, a car, even a raindrop would've been welcome. The only change, a silent haze that settled over the streets.

The dog's barking stopped, and in its place came a loud wail. My heart leapt. Could it be a fire truck?

A quick, desperate, piercing yelp and the sound died. "Nate, the dog. That's the neighbor's dog."

Goose bumps danced along my spine.

"Go check it out." Misty started pushing me towards the door.

I tried thinking of an excuse to stay put. "That dog's crazy. He'll probably bite me," was all I came up with.

"You're such a girl. If he tries to bite you, give him a kick."

"Oh, now I can pick on him," I said as I headed down the stairs. On the way out, I slammed the door to make Misty think she'd ticked me off.

Outside, I grabbed the big wood-splitting axe. Looking at the worn shaft, silvered with age, I wondered if I needed it. My hands wouldn't let go—I took that as my answer.

Hopping the old chain-link fence to the neighbor's yard left rusty freckles on my sweaty palms. I expected the runt to come tearing around the corner any second. Except when I got around back, what I saw frightened me *way* more than any dog.

Chapter 3 – A Bridge to Nowhere

On the back stucco wall, above the dog's water bowl, a huge stain of smeared blood and fur was all that remained of Snookums. It reminded me of my plate after I ate waffles with blueberry syrup, which until right then, was my favorite.

I'd turned to look away when Misty joined me. "Oh my gosh, what's that?"

"I'm guessing *that's* what's left of Snookums," I said, swallowing a lump in my throat.

"How the heck can you say something like that?" Misty's jaw clenched and her face turned a shade of red.

"Sorry. I, um, didn't think about what I was saying. I was sorta speechless."

"Then you should keep your mouth shut, Nate."

"You're right, Miss. It just came out. I'm really sorry." I rubbed my hands against my forehead. The day wasn't going so good. Even worse than that time at lunch when I sat on my sloppy joe.

She paused and took a deep breath. "Let's cut each other some slack. Least until we figure out what's going on."

"Yeah, agreed."

She turned away. "What happened to poor Snookums?"

"Don't know." Privately, I took back every nasty thing I'd ever said about the mutt. "Coyote maybe? Let's not hang around to find out." I eyed the sparse forest behind the yard. Years of logging had cleared every decent tree on this side of town, leaving a few sad saplings and lots of ugly stumps.

"Maybe we should get back inside," she said, glancing over to her house.

"Nothing we can do here. Let's head over to Greenburg. See if we can't find out what's going on."

"What if we run into the mayor?" She grabbed my arm.

"Let's just get going." I started walking.

*

"Could have been a chemical leak from one of the big factories, maybe a forest fire?" Misty said, guessing what could have caused everyone to evacuate. Whenever she got nervous, her mouth wouldn't shut.

"My money's on mass alien abduction."

She gave me a cool stare—she wasn't amused. I kept quiet and just let her blabber on about how this couldn't possibly be happening, until we'd walked almost all the way to the bridge.

"Your brother's shoes are killing my feet."

"Oh, Nate." I heard it in her voice; she hated complaining. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but Misty was one tough girl.

"Seriously, I think they're blood blisters."

"Not your feet, the bridge. Nate, look at the bridge."

I glanced up, not prepared for what I saw. "Whoa—the bridge, it's gone. I mean it's been destroyed."

All that remained were piles of rubble and the steel frame—twisted into a giant crumpled spider web. A huge crater sat where the overpass should have been. Someone really wanted this bridge gone.

Misty stepped forward and looked down at the huge pit. "Who would blow up the bridge? What do we do now, swim across?"

"There's no way I'd take on Bear River. Not this time of year."

"Our families could be over there. Let's find a raft or a boat," Misty said.

"Remember those outta towners who plopped in, one after another, trying to save each other?" Bear River swells all up with crazy currents and hardcore eddies every year. "That river's gulped down entire families. Let's just wave someone down and they'll get help." I stood on a pile of rubble, looking across.

"No one's there," Misty whispered.

We didn't say another word. We just stared across the bridge.

We stood there awhile longer. Still, no one showed: not at the bridge, not in the town, no cars driving by, nothing.

Finally, after standing there silent, just staring for what seemed hours, I lost it.

"I knew we should've come here before going to your house. I knew it!" I screamed at the top

of my lungs, hands raised like one of those cheesy TV preachers. "You know what the other explosion was, don't you? It had to be the other dam bridge. They've blown both bridges—we're trapped. Just you, me and that stupid little dog—no, wait—he's dead, how could I forget we saw his—"

Tears flowed. I'd only seen Misty cry one other time. Even when we were kids and she fell off her bike, she'd just shake it off.

She stood there, face in her hands, tender tears trickling down her cheeks. I thought, this might have been the worst thing I'd ever done.

There was only one thing I could think to do. I gave her a hug. In all the years I'd known Misty, I'd never hugged her. Sure, I'd tackled her a few times, but that's just not the same.

She felt a lot softer than I remembered. Maybe she was getting out of shape now that she wasn't playing dodgeball.

It felt weird, like, well, like hugging your best friend. I wanted to tell her it would be all right. That we'd see our parents again, but I was never a good liar.

She started wiping her cheeks. I quickly let go and took a couple steps back. "Um, maybe we should try hollering. See if we can get someone's attention? There still might be *someone* over there."

"If there was, they would have certainly heard your yelling."

"Yeah, about that—I'm really sorry. This is totally not your fault. I'm really, really sorry." I always messed things up. No wonder Misty hadn't been hanging around me. Sometimes, *I* don't even like to hang around me.

"Sorry, seems to be a theme with you today. But I'm cutting you some slack, remember?" A small smile slipped out and made me feel a little less like the world's biggest jerk. "So now what?"

The sun beat down on us, as if it'd been glued in place. The air felt stale and lifeless. "No use going to Greenburg if no one's over there. Let's go to Cedar Creek, see if the other bridge is really blown."

Sure enough, the Cedar Creek dry dam was completely gone. Crossing the creek would have been easy, but there's nothing except asphalt and trees between here and Chico. Which is, I don't know, at least a week's walk.

"We could take bikes," Misty suggested.

"No. It's all mountain roads, we wouldn't last an hour."

Drained, dog-tired, and defeated, we headed to Misty's house to regroup. It'd been one fantastically horrible day.

"I can't believe you tried to blame me for the bridge blowing up," she said.

"I didn't say it was your fault; I was just blaming you. There's a big difference."

Misty shook her head. My legs ached and my conscience stung. I didn't have it in me to argue—especially since I was wrong.

We both dragged our feet across the asphalt. The rough sound reminded me of a street sweeper.

"We've gotta get a car. I can't walk around this town anymore." I was still wearing my backpack. Misty had left hers at home.

"Everyone takes their keys when they evacuate," she said as we passed a house with a TV lounging comfortably in the middle of the lawn.

"Who said they evacuated? Maybe they had all the water extracted from their bodies and they turned to salt. Maybe there was a huge sale at the mall up in—hey, do you see that?"

She had. "Hey mister! Over here, please help!" With her long, perfect hair, Misty could have passed for a cheerleader as she waved her arms up and down.

The glare of the low sun made it hard to see the man caught in the shadows. He was old, shuffling his feet with a slight limp. He turned and slowly started towards us. The only thing I could see was that it wasn't the mayor; this guy was too tall and wasn't shaped like a blimp.

We started jogging towards him. "Oh, thank you. We really need some hel—"

When I turned back to look at Misty, I realized something was wrong.

Very wrong.

Misty stopped first. I took a couple more steps before turning to face her. "Come on."

I'd seen that look in her eyes twice today. Instantly, knots welled up in my stomach. "Miss, what's up?"

"Aaahh!" Her voice shook.

"What the—" I spun back around, thinking I knew what to expect. It had to be the guy who killed the dog. Even the mayor wouldn't freak Misty out like that.

The fur dangling from his bloody lips told me I was right, except it wasn't a guy. Whatever he or it was, one thing was sure, it was way past its expiration date.

I stepped into the shadow of a tall building so I could see the thing. Skinless, every inch covered in a sticky grayish-brown slime, like charcoal mixed with molasses. And the smell—burnt hair and rotten mayonnaise—even worse than the dumpster behind Harry's Indian and Sushi Hut.

I stood looking at it, completely freaked out. Then it dawned on me that it might be a good idea to get the heck out of there.

The words rattled as they came out, "Le-le-let's-go."

Misty's outstretched hand still pointed at the ghoul staggering towards us; I grabbed her hand and turned. Thankfully our legs worked. We ran eight or nine blocks and didn't stop until we got to her front porch.

"What was that?" Misty asked.

"I don't know." I tried to catch my breath. "I mean, I know, but I'm afraid to say."

Misty seemed winded, but calm, considering what we'd just seen. My knees wouldn't stop shaking.

"What? What do you think it was?" she demanded.

"It's obvious. That guy—err-thing—wasn't alive; it wasn't even all there. But it was taking a stroll down the street. It had to be a zombie."

"I knew you spent too much time watching that sci-fi channel."

"Okay, what's your explanation?" Now my hands were on my hips.

"I don't know." She had a lock of hair between her lips. "Maybe a chemical burn? That could

be why they evacuated the town."

"Chemical burn? You can do better than that. That thing looked like part of it was still in the ground somewhere. Did you smell it? That wasn't barbecue I smelled—"

"Nate. I swear sometimes you're disgusting on purpose." She stomped her foot.

"Look, whatever it was, it's bad news. Let's go in, then figure out what to do."

I forced a smile. Misty blew a few stray hairs out of her mouth and said, "Yeah. Better get in before it comes back for dessert."

*

I didn't feel much like eating, but we hadn't had a bite all day and Misty insisted. So I forced down some Coco Pebbles. I couldn't even finish the chocolaty sweet milk.

"What now? Lock ourselves in?" Misty asked.

"We could go out and kill it, one limping zombie. No problem. We get my dad's gun, then hunt it down." My fingers tapped on her old aluminum kitchen table.

I was pretty relieved when she said, "Hunt it down? I don't think so. We don't know for sure it's even a zombie. We should cross the river to Greenburg. Keep going to Quincy if we have to." She drank a huge glass of milk in one long gulp, then wiped her mustache off with her sleeve.

"Greenburg? Quincy? No way. Who knows how many zombies are there. Maybe none, but maybe hundreds. What if we get surrounded? We'd have no place to hide."

"Okay, then we secure the house, and wait out your zombie invasion watching movies." Misty's eyes patrolled the front window. "Help has to arrive...soon."

"I saw this movie where they waited out a zombie invasion in the mall. The mall has everything: food, guns, clothes."

Misty picked up the phone, smacked the receiver a couple times, then listened, like she might bash a dial tone out of it. Her nails were covered with dirt and chipped pink polish.

"There's no gun store in the mall. Besides, our mall's open air." That had to be the only time Misty ever turned down a trip to the mall.

"So, the people in this movie, did they make it?" She twisted the phone cord around her finger.

Misty had a corded phone. Her dad didn't buy fancy stuff like cordless phones, new cars, or two-ply toilet paper.

"Don't remember. I think one of them got pregnant."

"We don't have to worry about that."

"The baby turned out to be some sort of monster."

"Aren't they all?" Then she suddenly got excited, "Oh, I got it. We'll hide out in Walmart. It's perfect; they've got everything."

Walmart was the pride of Indian Springs (like I said, it was a small town). We'd beat out every town in three counties for the honor of selling discount merchandise. My dad said it was the only reason Mayor Frank had gotten re-elected. Walmart wasn't a bad idea. Except for one thing, "There's too much glass in the front."

"Oh yeah...Could we get some plywood, board up the windows?"

"Might work, plus I bet it has one of those security gate things."

"Then Walmart it is," she said, smiling with satisfaction.

"Okay, but we'll stop by my house first to get the gun and some clothes." I stood up and my leg throbbed where the mayor had bitten me. I wanted to look at it. See if I was done for sure, but I was afraid of alarming Misty, so I decided not to look.

"I should pack some stuff, too."

As I looked out at the sun cowering behind the mountains, I tried not to think of how messed up this all was. "What's keeping you? We better get going," I hollered up the stairs.

Misty's old backpack was bursting (literally in some places) at the seams.

"Hope you got enough clothes," I said.

"Yeah, should probably gotten more."

"That wasn't what I meant. But you can pick out some at Walmart"

"Walmart? For clothes? Don't think so." Misty looked at me as if I was crazy. "I wouldn't be caught dead in anything from Walmart."

I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"We're going to need to find a ride. Something with a trunk," I said, looking out the window at the lonely streets.

"Haven't we been over this? We don't know how to drive and my dad took the car."

"Driving's easy, and I wasn't thinking of your station wagon—more like my dad's Fastback."

My dad had a 1967 Shelby GT500 Fastback. Mint condition, in factory powder blue. He only took it out for car shows and the Indian Hills Fourth of July parade.

"That's the first bright idea you've had."

"What happened to the whole cutting me some slack thing?" We'd always given each other lip; it was sorta funny. But lately it'd been getting downright brutal.

As she grabbed her backpack and headed out the door, Misty shot me her little half-smile that raised the dimple on just the right side of her mouth.

I took the big axe and followed. I knew Misty couldn't resist taking the Fastback—no one could, even a girl.

"Speaking of bright ideas, didn't Greg get an electric scooter last Christmas?" Greg was one of Misty's two older brothers.

Misty's older brothers sucked. Not for Misty, they never picked on her; her dad wouldn't stand for it. But they delighted in torturing me. Fortunately, they weren't too bright, and over the years I'd gotten real good at avoiding them.

"It's really a toy," she said. "But it should get us to your house."

There wasn't much room on the scooter with all three of us: Misty, myself, and the huge axe. She let me steer and put her arms tight around my waist. That was the second time she'd hugged me that day, or our whole lives, depending on how you looked at it.

It was only five blocks to my house, but we still managed to run into a little trouble.

The zombie-type of trouble.

"Let's turn back and take another street," Misty said as a trio of female zombies approached at the end of the block. They could have passed for three grandmothers out in their Sunday best, except their pastel and lace-fringed dresses were soaked in blood.

I stopped the scooter. My first impulse was to dump the thing and run back to Misty's house.

When I was six and afraid of the dark, my dad taught me this trick: Stand still and slowly count to ten; then things don't seem so scary.

I stared at the zombies and silently counted to ten.

"Nate, what are you waiting for? Free hard candy? Get out of here!"

Okay, so it doesn't work with zombies, but I realized they moved slow—really slow. Heck, one of them was sporting a walker.

"Nah, they're crawling. We can ride around them," I said, casually waving my hand at her.

I didn't wait for a reply. Daylight was burning, and the elderly-undead seemed so slow I really thought we had nothing to worry about.

As we rode past, they turned to follow. I still wasn't worried; they were way on the other side of the street.

A half-second later, I felt a lurch. I flew over the handlebars. At the same time, Misty screamed.

Now I was worried.

I rolled completely over and landed on my feet. Nice move, except I lost the axe.

I turned and saw one of the granny zombies had Misty by the backpack. I don't want to repeat what she screamed. Let's just say she wasn't eager for grandma to get close enough to give her a kiss.

My axe lay in the street, almost right under them. In one move, I swooped down, retrieved it, and brought the blunt end up, smacking it in the chin.

Crunch—something flew from its jaw.

Misty broke loose. The zombie let out a high-pitched scream. I swung the axe back, about to take a whack at its head, when it turned back and bit down on my arm, making a wet, mushy sound.

"Aah!" I cried and pulled my arm free.

Misty had already retreated several paces. I wanted to take another whack at it, but I realized I didn't even know if that would stop it. I mean, sure it does in the movies, but would it work for real? Could I even hit it hard enough? And what about her two bridge buddies, just a few feet away?

The scooter was thrashed, so we ran.

"Thanks, Nate."

"What the heck happened?" I asked between breaths.

"It jumped me."

"It did what?"

"It jumped—well, it was more of a lurch. It just dove at me as we rode past. Those things are strong—slow, but strong." Misty held a clump of hair; I could tell she was trying not to put it in her mouth.

"I didn't think of that. We'll have to keep farther away in the future."

"What are you saying? Do you think we'll see more of them?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, but this morning we walked from one end of town to the other; the place was empty." I held the axe behind my back, hiding the arm that had been bitten, too afraid to look. "Now we've gone two blocks, three zombies. Speaking of which, they're still following. Let's take a detour. Make sure we lose them before we get to the house."

We'd started down a side street towards the center of town, easily losing the little-old-zombies when I felt a burning sensation on my arm. "Ouch, that stings."

"What, what is it?"

"I don't know. My arm, it burns. Aah, it really burns." I stopped and grabbed it. I couldn't help but look. It was bright red, but I didn't see any blood—only faint bite marks.

"Nathan, it's turning red!"

"Quick. Some water!" I started to panic. I looked around, but couldn't find any, not even a spigot.

"You musta been bit. You're turning into a zombie!" Misty's eyes bulged as she stared at my arm.

"Just get me something to put on it!" I yelled.

"There's the Pizza Pit. I'll get some water." Misty ran off towards the shops down at the end of the street.

It seriously burned now, like holding your arm under scalding water. Tears rolled down my

cheeks. I fought the urge to scream. I wasn't a crier, but this sucked.

Unable to wait for Misty, I used the only liquid I had: saliva. I didn't know what else to do; I just spit on my arm. It helped, so I kept doing it. A second later, I heard the crash of shattering glass.

"Here's some water—Yuck!" Misty returned with a big glass. "What are you doing? That's disgusting."

"Yeah, but it works. Pour that on my arm." The water took the rest of the burn away. It still stung—I mean really good—but no more burn. "Hey, did you break a window in the Pizza Pit?"

"Yeah, I had to get in. The door was locked, so I grabbed a patio chair and viola! A glass of water."

"Wow, you're my hero."

"Shut up."

"Hope they don't find out it was us. That's the only decent pizza in town." I smiled and added, "Seriously, thanks."

"What did that to your arm?"

"It must have been..." I thought for a moment. "The zombie. When I hit the zombie, it bit my arm."

I looked down. I had the world's worst Indian burn. "Miss, did it touch you?"

"No, only my backpack. But what about your arm—"

"Your backpack." I quickly grabbed her and spun her around. This wasn't the time for kid-gloves. "Geez, better take it off. You've got zombie snot or something all over it."

She dropped it like an outta style handbag.

"Wow, that stuff is strong." Part of the material had already dissolved and it seemed to be spreading.

Misty froze and looked me up and down, "Nate, you've been bit by a zombie. You are going to turn into one now."

"No, no, I'm fine. It didn't really bite me. I mean, I think I knocked its dentures out. It kinda gummed me."

"Nate, that stuff's toxic. You've been infected with zombie snot; it's only a matter of time now."

She stared at me, deadly serious, and started stepping backward.

Chapter 5 – Zombie Juice, Now with the Killing Power of Lemonade

"No, it doesn't work that way. I've seen tons of zombie movies. You don't get zombified unless it breaks the skin," I said, thinking about how my leg still ached.

"Movies, Nate, movies. These are real zombies. In the movies zombie snot doesn't burn you, does it?"

"Listen, I'm fine. Let's just find a hose and wash that stuff off the axe."

"Maybe I better hold the axe—just in case." Misty eyed me like any moment I might lean over and take a bite.

"I'm not going to turn into a flipping zombie." I'd had it with her, I really had. It's not nice to tell someone they're going to turn into a zombie, not nice at all. "If you want the axe, take it. You can lug it around."

With axe in hand, Misty seemed satisfied. She cleaned it, looked back to make sure we weren't being followed and said, "Let's get going."

"Misty, did you notice the zombie's eyes? All pale and fogged over—like Mayor Frank? I think he might have been a zombie or maybe starting to turn into one."

"Oh, good. That's a relief."

"Good? What the heck do you mean, good?" I said, still irritated with her.

"At least he wasn't trying to kiss me."

"He was trying to bite your head off. Isn't that worse?"

Misty just shrugged.

*

No one was *ever* here when I got home. Still, the house felt strange. As if it hadn't been lived in for years. It was the biggest house for blocks. Fake log siding and precisely placed boulders. Even I

could tell it looked too perfect to fit in with the rest of the neighborhood.

"Umm, Nate, did you see this?" Misty sat on the arm of one of the crushed velvet chairs in the living room. Shoe prints on the white carpet traced her path.

"Hey, get out of there. You know better than that."

"Your mom must be so worried." She walked over and handed me a copy of the Indian Springs Tribune.

Misty was probably as close to my mom as I was. When we were about six, Misty's mom died. After that, my mom kinda took over as a surrogate. Our families always hung out, anyway, barbecues, camping, stuff like that. So, Mom and Misty always spent (too much, if you ask me) time together.

Right on the paper's front page, in bold with large black type: Two Local Teens Missing, Presumed Lost in Woods.

"It says they were organizing search parties to look for us along the trails behind my house," Misty said.

The article went on to talk about how upset our parents were. It even quoted my dad: "I'm praying for the safe return of my son. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I cried all night." Crying? My dad? He barely even laughs.

For a second, I thought I might cry. "How could we have done this to our parents? What were we thinking?"

"What if we never see them again? I've thought the same thing," Misty said.

I held in the tears, but was blinking like I was making googly eyes at her. Misty's eyes didn't look dry, either. She ripped the paper out of my hands. "Come on. Let's get going. Grab some clothes. I'll get the gun."

I dumped most of the camping stuff out of my backpack and almost stopped to look in the bathroom mirror. I was sure my hair looked rattier than ever, but with no one around, I didn't care.

I grabbed a pair of shoes and finally took a look at my leg. My sock had protected me from the worst of it. It was red with deep teeth marks and a bit of the skin was even broken. I didn't want to think about what it might mean, so I quickly loaded some t-shirts, jeans, lots of socks, and...Oh no,

underwear. "Why can't Mom stay home and do laundry like a normal mother?"

"Do you ever actually listen to the stuff that comes out of your mouth?" Misty walked into my room. "Got some bad news. No gun. Your dad musta took it when they left."

I wasn't paying much attention. Sure, the gun was important, but not as important as clean underwear. If you doubt my priorities, try wearing the same pair for more than a couple days.

I frantically dug through my closet where I had a pile of old clothes I'd worn-out or outgrown.

"What are you doing? You feeling okay? Is it the zombie snot?"

"All my underwear are in the hamper, dirty. I can't find a single clean pair."

"There'll be hundreds of pairs at Walmart. You can change 'em every hour if you want. Just don't ask me to do your laundry." She picked up a dirty shirt off the floor and threw it at me. "Get a bandage for that arm and let's go."

*

The leather seat cradled my body like a custom-fitted chair. "I can't believe I'm doing this. You know how much Dad loves this car." I had serious second thoughts about driving it around zombie-infested streets.

"It's either this or we walk," Misty said.

On the other hand, *walking* around zombie-infested streets sounded even worse.

The engine kicked right over and started purring. There's just something about the deep bass of a big block engine, especially when you're behind the wheel.

I'd never driven stick, or automatic for that matter. But I knew how, at least I thought I did.

First, put it in reverse. Except, rather than sliding into reverse, the gears ground together, the sound worse than fingernails on a chalkboard.

"Oops, forgot the clutch."

"You sure you know how to drive this? We might be safer taking our chances with the zombies."

"Ha ha, just give me a second."

Misty put on her seatbelt. "Nate, safety first." I wasn't sure if she was making fun of me or just

being cautious—probably both.

Slowly, the car backed out of the driveway. I watched the garage door close and wondered if I'd ever set foot in my house again.

I made it into first gear, but stalled going into second. "Not a word, Misty, not one word."

She crinkled her nose and smiled. "Okay. But make a stop at Camping World. We should pick up a generator and some supplies. In case the power goes out."

"Good idea, but we'll have to be fast. We've still gotta stop at the mall to stock up on food."

"There's tons of food at Walmart."

"Yeah, but it's all canned and processed stuff. There's real, fresh food at the mall. We'll raid the food court."

"Nathan, you can't fool me. I know you just want to load up on cinnamon rolls. You're such a huge cinnamon roll pig."

"Fine. Forget the mall," I said, a little worried about the possibility of cinnamon roll withdrawals.

We rounded the corner. Alone in the middle of the street stood another zombie. This one wore an old style tuxedo, bow tie, even tails. It looked like a big chunk of its scalp was coming off; either that, or it was a seriously bad toupee.

"Five points for hitting the zombie, ten if it doesn't get back up." Misty sounded almost cheerful.

"No way. I am *not* hitting a zombie with this car."

"What? That's what you do, Nathan. Plow through zombies. How else are we going to kill them?"

"I'm not hitting it, end of conversation."

"But—"

"No!"

"At least pass it on the left. I don't want to look at it." Misty folded her arms across her chest.

As I passed it, the thought occurred to me that it might dive at the car, like the grandma

zombie. I hit the gas and dropped it back down a gear, only I forgot the clutch again.

The car lurched, the zombie lurched, and the next thing I knew a rabid zombie was knocking at my window—knocking with its head, that is.

"Nathan, get the car started, now!" Misty started crawling up the back of her seat.

"I'm trying, I'm trying." Thick green goo dripped out of its eye and smeared all over the window. It took me a few seconds to think. Clutch in, turn key, a little gas, first gear, clutch out, more gas.

"You so cannot drive stick," Misty said as we sputtered away, leaving the zombie behind.

"Oh no. No. No!"

"What, what's wrong?"

"Zombie snot—it's all over the window. That stuff will eat through the paint like your brothers at an all-you-can-eat buffet."

"Don't panic, we'll wash it off."

"If anything happens to this car, my dad is going to kill me."

"Nate, we're driving around an abandoned town overrun by zombies. I think you might get a few scratches on the paint."

"No, no, unacceptable. See if you can find a hose."

"There's one by the mall. Pull it up on the sidewalk." She pointed across the intersection.

Misty jumped out and ran for the hose. I followed out on her side. "Nate, there's no knob. It's one of those security things."

I dove back into the car and popped the trunk. Dad always carried a tool kit for just such emergencies. Well, not just such, but you know what I mean.

I grabbed a pair of vice grips and dashed to the spigot. Misty sprayed the window as I supervised.

"The paint's okay." A wave of relief washed over me. "It's a sign. We're going to make it through this."

"Oh, brother." She shook her head. "We're already here. Might as well get your cinnamon

rolls."

"We'll drive right through the middle," I said cheerfully.

I'm not sure who decided our mall qualified as a real mall; there must not be any actual standard for the word. Ours was really more of a large, beat-down shopping center. A couple dozen shops ringed an old three-screen theater.

Together, we dragged a cement trashcan aside and drove down the mall's center walkway.

Looking around, I realized we could easily get cornered here. Suddenly I wasn't so eager for my cinnamon roll fix.

We slowly drove down the main walkway. Sappy jazz music floated overhead. Stores wide open, welcoming us as if we'd been expected.

"Miss, take the left side; I'll go right. Get as much food as you can and keep an eye out for anything else we might use," I said, trying to sound as if I had everything under control.

"You sure you're feeling okay, Nate? No sudden craving for raw hamburger?"

"If I do, you'll be the first to know." I tried to smile. "Just get going."

It wasn't long before we'd loaded the trunk with cold cuts, cinnamon rolls, even gourmet cookie dough. One thing was sure: we weren't going to starve. By the time we reached the end of the mall, we'd made a pretty good haul.

"Hey, Miss, I'm going to check out the Sharper Image. You finish up the food court."

"Got it." She wasn't carrying food, but rather an armful of clothes and one of those big handbags, the kind you always see photos of stars carrying puppies around in.

"What the heck?" I said, pointing to the stack of loot in her arms.

"I have to replace my backpack and stuff."

I couldn't put together any sort of response to that, so I turned and left.

At the store, I got a bag and started stuffing it with one of everything in sight. When I got to the binoculars, I took my time. Lots of models were on display. As I picked up the most expensive-looking pair, I heard a scream.

I ran back as fast as I could.

"Nate, help!"

Misty stood behind the counter of the Krazy Karrot Smoothie Bar, a zombie close behind.

I didn't worry about the car. It was in my way, so I hopped up and slid over the hood. Just like a guy in those old car movies they play on free movie channels, except that I slid right over and onto my butt. I would have been embarrassed if I weren't so panicked.

By the time I got to the counter, Misty was cornered. The zombie almost on top of her. She desperately held up a stool—the only thing between her and its teeth.

I headed toward the counter when I realized I'd messed up. I'd left the axe in the Shelby. There wasn't time to go back and get it. The muscles in her arms visibly straining, I had to find something to hit this thing with or Misty was zombie chow.

I picked up a plastic chair and threw it at the zombie, hoping to draw its attention. It just bounced off its head.

The zombie, inches from Misty, pushed against the stool, jaws full of brown, rotting teeth snapping at her.

I grabbed the largest thing in reach, a five-gallon bucket of lemonade. Struggling, I got it over my shoulder. Somehow, I managed to swing it over my head and upside-down onto the zombie. Lemonade flew everywhere. I was about to tackle the thing when I heard an ear-piercing scream. It wasn't me. It wasn't Misty. It was the zombie.

This guy really didn't care for lemonade. It fell, first to its knees, then flat on the ground. Its legs jerked and kicked, like its head was in an electrical socket.

A second later, it stopped. Smoke rose out of the bucket, still stuck on its head. The monster lay motionless.

Rather than step around it, Misty climbed on top of the counter and walked over to me, not once taking her eyes off the corpse.

"What was in that lemonade?" I said.

"Nothing. It was just lemonade, even tasted some." I looked over at her. She was shaking slightly, splashes of lemonade on her face and shirt. I wanted to take her hand, but guys don't go

around taking their best friend by the hand—even if they had just fought off a killer zombie together.

There were tails on its retro tux. "Misty, I'm really sorry. It's the same one. I should have hit it with the car. It's all my fault."

"Don't be sorry. This is the best break we've had. We've found their weakness. We know how to kill them." She looked down at the puddle of lemonade and zombie pus pooled on the floor.

"What—lemonade? You think lemonade kills zombies?"

"Probably not lemonade, but something in it. The sugar, maybe? I don't know, but look, it works."

I couldn't argue. Smoke still billowed out of the bucket. This zombie was toast. "Should I kick the bucket off its head?"

"No way, that's sick."

"This from the girl who stuck gummy worms all the way up her nose."

"Not gummy *worms*, it was just one, and it's only went halfway up each side." I could see her starting to blush. "I was just a kid then, anyway."

"Wasn't that on our last camping trip?"

"Remember how we got that dorky kid from the dry campsite to eat it?"

"You mean, how you told him you'd give him five bucks if he ate it? Only you didn't have five dollars and I had to pay up to keep him from telling our parents?"

"Your dad gives you a huge allowance for just taking the trash out." She looked around and seemed to suddenly remember we were standing over a zombie corpse. "Let's get more lemonade and get outta here."

"If you're right about the lemonade, we'll need some weapons. There's a CB's Toys down at the corner. Go grab some water guns. I'll find more lemonade."

Before running off, she grabbed a large cup of the stuff to take with her.

I found three full buckets of lemonade in the fridge and several cases of lemons in back.

Misty returned with the largest Super Soakers I'd ever seen. These things had tanks you wore on your back. I wondered what kind of terrible people my parents were for never buying me one of

these.

"Says they shoot up to fifty feet," she said.

"Um, yeah, that should do the trick."

We used an entire five-gallon bucket filling up the two Super Soakers and a few smaller guns. I grabbed a few tools, like the lemon masher and funnel, so we could turn the rest of the lemons into zombie-killing juice.

I strapped the tank on and started pumping the gun. "Now we're ready. Bring on some zombies."

<End of Preview>

Super Zombie Juice Mega Bomb is available wherever ebooks are sold.

* * *

Dysgraphia Awareness

What is Dysgraphia?

In simple terms, dysgraphia is the inability to get thoughts from the brain written onto paper correctly. As my editor can attest, dysgraphia can result in some pretty gnarly sentences.

For example, take the sentence, "I really like to read funny books." A dysgraphic child might write the sentence as, "I like read to red funny books."

When handwritten, the sentence may appear sloppy, and the words may slope up or down the page.

The hardest thing for most parents and teachers to understand is when someone with dysgraphia re-reads the offending sentence, his mind may tell him it's written correctly. That is, when a dysgraphic person proofreads a messed-up sentence, he may (depending on degree and type of dysgraphia) actually see, "I really like to read funny books."

Until the errors are specifically pointed out, a dysgraphic student may not be able to see his errors or omissions, and simply asking the child to repeatedly re-read the sentence will only result in frustration for the student and instructor.

What are signs a child may be dysgraphic?

Some common symptoms include:

- Poor spelling
- Messy handwriting
- Uncomfortable pencil grip, or pain when writing
- Writing on an upward or downward slant
- Trouble forming letters (common examples include: reversing letters, mixing uppercase and lowercase letters, or mixing cursive and print letters)

Read more about what to look for: <http://www.ncl.org/types-learning-disabilities/dysgraphia/what-is-dysgraphia>

What can I do if I suspect my child might be dysgraphic?

Unfortunately, many educators aren't trained to properly identify the signs that a student may be dysgraphic. If you suspect your child may have this or any other learning disability, you can request to have your child tested by an expert trained to identify learning difficulties through your school district.

In the U.S., federal laws require that schools promptly acknowledge and comply with your request for testing. In fact, if your child's school doesn't have trained personnel available, they must pay for or arrange for an outside expert to complete this testing at no cost to you.

In many other countries, schools are required to make needed accommodations and offer special assistance to children with learning disabilities. In the U.S. this is done by a formal evaluation process with results in a written Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

While many schools work hard to assist students, some prefer to ignore these obligations or provide as little assistance as possible. There are child advocacy groups that can assist parents in getting the help their child needs. These groups may contact the school on your child's behalf, attend meetings with you, or in extreme cases, file formal complaints against the district.

Just remember, the time you spend securing the correct diagnosis and assistance for your child will go a long way to ensuring that he or she has the proper tools to be successful, not only in school, but in life. Your child is worth it!

Here are several websites with information and advice on getting your child the help they deserve:

<http://www.education-a-must.com>

<http://www.ncl.org/parents-child-disabilities/ld-rights>

Outside the US:

<http://www.mencap.org.uk>

<http://www.ldworldwide.org>

* * *

About the Author

MJ lives in the foothills of the Sierra Mountains with his wife and two daughters. Due to a bizarre childhood incident at his school library, MJ never developed an interest in adult literature.

When not reading or writing books for kids, he runs a video arcade company building retro arcade machines just like he played as a child. MJ is available as both a court approved zombie expert and for FEMA certified "zombie safety" school lectures.

He's currently working on his next novel, the second installment in the *Super Zombie Juice* series.

* * *

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the folks at Red Adept Publishing for their effort on this novel.